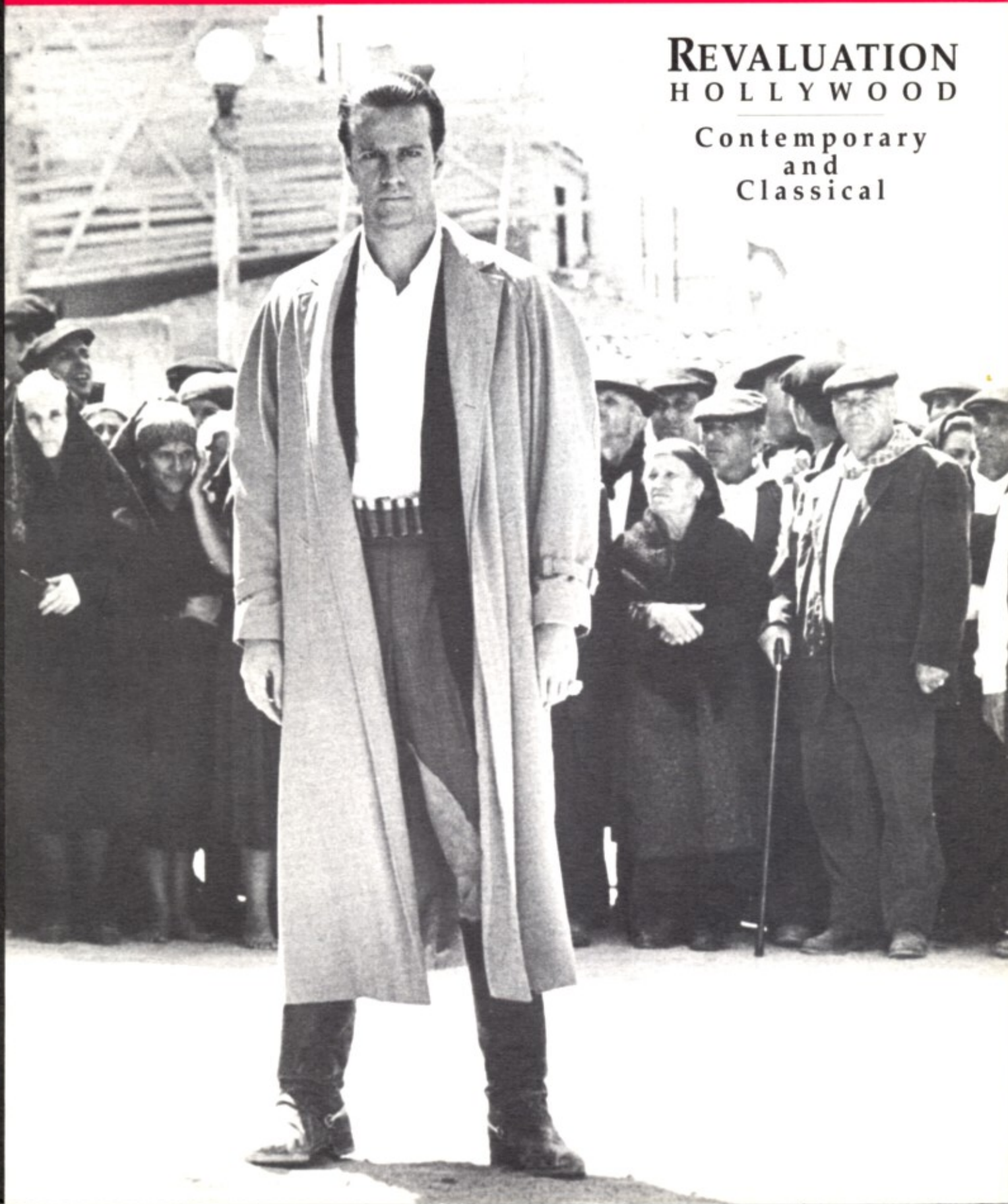


*cine*ACTION

REVALUATION HOLLYWOOD

Contemporary
and
Classical



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THE COLLECTIVE

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Editorial

Why — given the Canadian sensitivity to American 'cultural colonization,' and the complementary yearning after an autonomous national identity — should a Canadian film journal devote an issue ('yet *another* issue,' one can hear some people protest) to Hollywood movies? And, worse, not to expose and denounce them as so much disguised propaganda for the overwhelmingly powerful culture below the 49th parallel, but in a strongly positive spirit, to embrace and celebrate their achievements?

I have to say, first, that for me, after fifteen years in this country, that 'autonomous national identity' remains a chimera incapable — and *obviously* incapable — of realization under existing socio-economic realities: there is simply no point in discussing it. (This is true, at least, for English-speaking Canada; it might not be true of an independent Quebec prepared to go its own heroic cultural-economic way, in which case good luck to it.) William MacGillivray's touching and intelligent article in the last issue eloquently exposes the quandary without proposing a solution (understandably, as there is none to propose, in the terms currently available).

But isn't it time — more than time — we stopped talking about nationalities and national identities and allegiances, and started talking again openly and defiantly about *movements*? Especially, about feminism and socialism. The only way by which the cultural hegemony of the United States can be overthrown — truly the only way, no other is imaginable — is through a successful international anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal revolution (the two linked indissolubly).

It is important to build oppositional, alternative cinemas: Third World, Avant-garde... But it is of equal importance, side by side with

this, constantly to examine and re-examine the products, past and contemporary, of what remains the dominant cinema, not to denounce its hegemony yet again, but to explore its own testimonies (both intentional and inadvertent) to the oppressiveness and monstrosity of the entire overarching system of capitalism and patriarchy within which Canada, the United States, and the whole of Western civilisation, is trapped; hence to effect further acts of appropriation, building an alternative and oppositional tradition out of the very artefacts that have so often been heedlessly misrecognized as mere typical products of a monolithic system.

We have by now learnt — if we are prepared to



The Sicilian

listen — that, beyond its monstrous social injustices and the hideous spiritual and psychological impoverishment of its victims, the system of patriarchy/capitalism threatens the very continuance of life on our planet. *CineAction* (and I hope I speak here, though not elsewhere, for the entire collective) is committed, in its necessarily modest and marginal way, to contributing to the construction of a potent North American Left.

ROBIN WOOD

For Marlene

by Florence Jacobowitz

Remembering a star persona is significantly different from remembering a person and here I'd like to do both: begin with the concentration of cultural significance that the person emblemized and end with my respects for the person whose many talents and sensibility made the emblem possible. I hope that *Cineaction* has and will continue to contribute to a critical and theoretical revaluation of Dietrich and other female stars (so dramatically flattened and misused in Lacanian and post/structuralist feminist criticism), an approach which seems to me more consistent with the popular imagination of the last half century during which such star images were developed and circulated. If Dietrich were merely a decorated fetish in an overdressed studio genre-picture, the strength and power of her star persona would have long since dissipated. The fact that it has retained its potency to such a degree suggests that the presence is rooted in a complex of meaning which speaks of subversion, disdain and protest. Dietrich's cool insolence placed the dominant culture's tendencies towards the objectification and exploitation of women. With a direct glance back, a look of intelligent awareness and a keen sense of irony, she revelled in her power and empowered those equally marginalised or just plain sick of the masculinist/heterosexist echelons of a hypocritical bourgeois society. Every detail, from the tux and tails to the gravelly 'sprech' songs, fuelled the critique of a hegemonic culture which insists on strict gender distinctions and nationalistic membership. The posture reminds one that women can enjoy the same privileged place and their exclusion is a symptom of enforced masculine dominance. Many of her films dramatize the thematic of crossing the boundaries of class, gender and race, challenging one to question how identity is formed, who is privileged and why.

The offscreen presence complemented and augmented the screen persona. Dietrich was a 'citoyen du monde' who refused to be categorized in terms of place, marital status or sexual orientation; she maintained an open marriage and had lovers who

included (it was rumoured) both men and women. She cultivated the notion that one should pursue one's beliefs, convictions and desires and leave social mores behind, and she followed through this message of protest on many levels. One shouldn't underestimate the bravery of the person who loved the Berlin she left and defiantly proclaimed her rejection of German National Socialism, unlike many of her peers. In Maximilian Schell's *Marlene* (1983) she calmly tells him that, "We knew all about the concentration camps," thereby implying that for people of integrity the choice was clear. How many German artists who were *not* persecuted spurned their 'heimatland' to take out citizenship with an Allied nation? Many of her German fans never fully forgave her.

Dietrich's greatest period was her close collaboration with Sternberg in the 30's, and if anything, these films evidence the director's celebration of the protest crystallized in the star. The identification with an openly sexual and transgressive persona is activated and carried through each of her performances in this period, tempered by a melancholic awareness of the difficulties of pursuing self-determination against great odds.

Dietrich revelled in her glamorous beauty and sophistication, and used it as a form of her own empowerment and pleasure, spurning appropriation. Her North American debut in *Morocco* billed her as "the woman all women want to see." We tend to forget that the largest constituency of her audiences were women who donned trousers (as fashion) but clearly and profoundly understood the pleasure of challenge and transformation embodied in this star. Being "one of the boys" meant *not* being cut off, isolated and vulnerable; it meant surviving.

Dietrich remains a potent emblem of combative defiance, of possibility, of transgressing all imposed limitations which curtail human achievement. The significance of the image resonates beyond her death and continues to emit that charge of vitality that electrifies the best of popular art.



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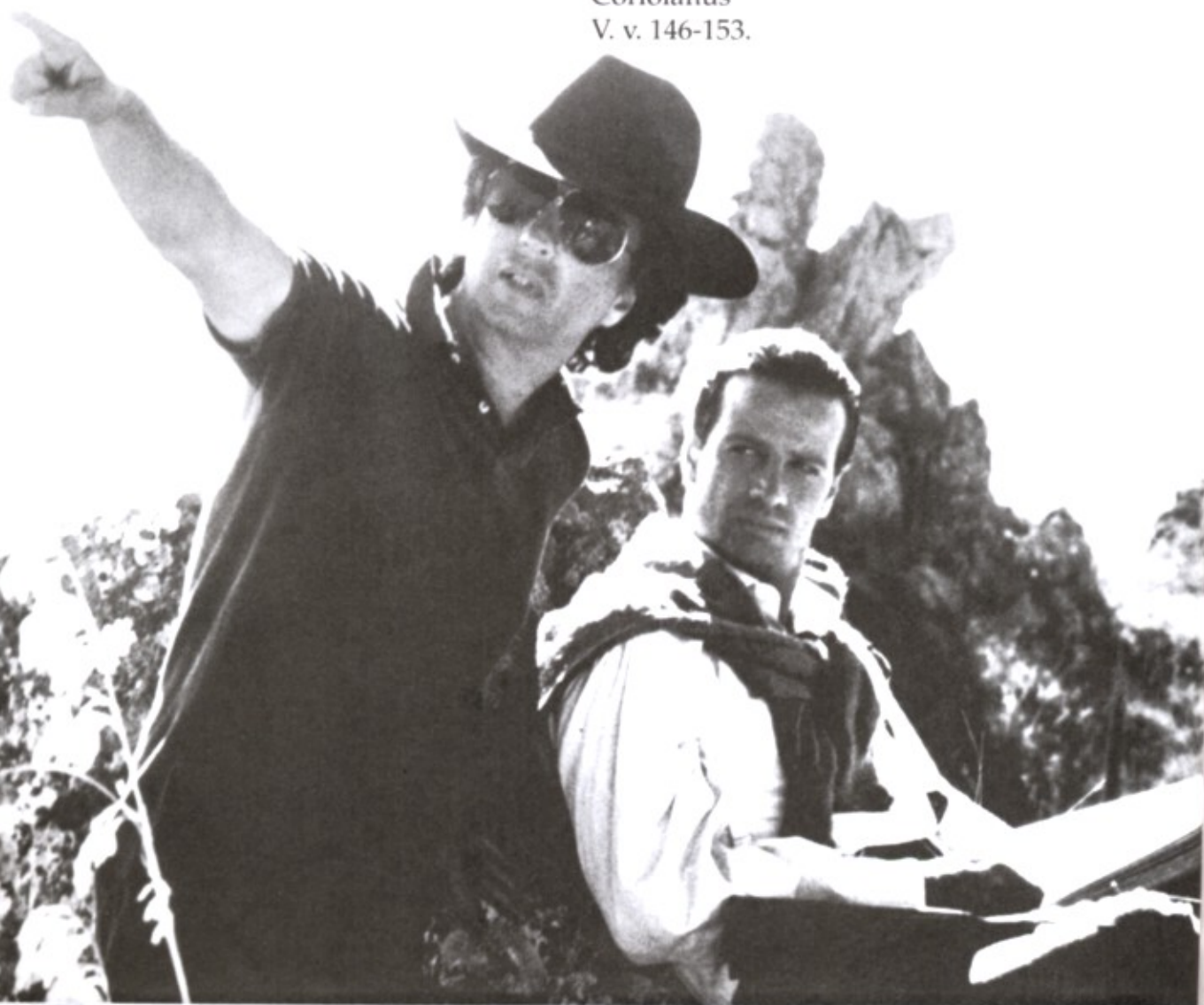
Not Just a Bandit

MICHAEL CIMINO'S *THE SICILIAN*

by Brad Stevens

"My rage is gone
And I am struck with sorrow. Take him up.
Help, three o' th' chiefest soldiers; I'll be one.
Beat thou the drum, that it speak mournfully;
Trail your steel pikes. Though in this city he
Hath widowed and unchilded many a one,
Which to this hour bewail the injury,
Yet he shall have a noble memory."

Shakespeare
Coriolanus
V. v. 146-153.



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The proposition that Michael Cimino is among the most important of contemporary filmmakers is not one that is currently likely to find many supporters. Indeed for most supposedly 'sophisticated' commentators Cimino is a somewhat ridiculous figure, a representative of values now considered outmoded. These values can be adequately summed up by the word 'seriousness.' It is not, of course, that seriousness itself, as a concept, is thought to be unfashionable; indeed it is no more than good form to regularly bemoan its absence from today's cultural products. Nevertheless the films most widely admired (to the extent, at least, that admiration is a response permissible to the postmodern intellectual) are inevitably those that reflect the critic's sense of superiority to despised artworks, including (perhaps especially) a superiority to the works in which this attitude is expressed: the representative postmodern text, that is, not only tells us that it has 'seen through' the products of an outmoded cultural tradition, but that this seeing through is itself not to be taken 'seriously.' One need look no further than the American horror film, a genre which in recent years seems incapable of functioning without resort to the 'comic' mode, divided as it is between works containing large elements of humour and simplistic parodies, the humour (which has a function directly opposed to that in, for instance, Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, where its aim is to satirize a wider social world) serving either to 'send up' a genre which is seen as essentially solipsistic, or to soften the radical insights of which the genre is capable and of which Romero's *Martin* and Cohen's *God Told Me To* are exemplary.

The political implications of this are obvious, and it is clear that Cimino's socialism and the general derision with which his work is greeted are intimately connected. As Raymond Carney has pointed out...

"Ed Meese's or Ronald Reagan's implicit belief that whereas politics is serious business, art is a frivolous game played by sissies in which nothing is really at stake and in which nothing that matters is actually affirmed or denied, ironically meets contemporary deconstructionist efforts to insulate the text within the hermetic boundaries of its own margin of textuality and the attempts of formalist and most genre critics of film to treat the text as existing within a self-contained artistic realm of self-referential signification."¹

The importance of Cimino's work becomes clear when seen in this context, his extreme unfashionability obviously the result of his being as far from a postmodern artist as it is possible to be.

If I choose to begin an analysis of *The Sicilian* by briefly discussing its reviews it is not because I am attempting to engage in a critical debate, for even a cursory reading reveals that there is nothing in them to engage with, their interest being purely of the symptomatic kind.² The most obvious, and perhaps most intriguing symptom is in their

attitude towards the *kind* of art that Cimino represents. The only viewpoint which the critics would be prepared to support in a film of this kind would be that of ironic detachment: if Cimino had been prepared to simply declare his superiority to the film's protagonist, Salvatore Giuliano, then the critical response would undoubtedly have been affirmative; since Cimino resolutely refuses to do this, the critics have no option but to condemn the film from their own superior position. Irony, in other words, when its presence clearly cannot be affirmed in the text under discussion, is read back into that text in the form of a critique, the dominant tone of the reviews of *The Sicilian*, as of *Heaven's Gate* before it, being blatantly sarcastic. This is most obvious in Ian Johnstone's piece in *The Sunday Times* (4/9/88) wherein Mr. Johnstone quotes several lines of dialogue which are clearly intended to be funny ("If you don't rape me, I shall have to rape you") while informing us that he finds them funny because they are intended to be taken seriously. Geoff Andrew in *Time Out* strikes a similar note, declaring the film to be "gloriously inept and overblown" and exhorting his readers to "see it...and have a good hoot."

The attitudes expressed towards Cimino's use of convention are especially revealing. Virtually every review contains some kind of negative comment on the wide range of accents (English, American, French) spoken by the supposedly Sicilian characters. Tim Palleine in *The Guardian* (1/9/88) complains that "the visual realism wavers between the bandits' grimly unshaven faces and their sporting shirts dazzlingly white enough for a washing powder advertisement," while Victoria Mather in *The Daily Telegraph* (1/9/88) notes that Giuliano "reserves enough funds from the money he robs from the rich to give to the poor to buy himself crisp, Byronic shirts and cashmere coats." Perhaps the silliest observation comes from Philip French in *The Observer* in the form of a sarcastic aside on the film's showing us "Italian newspapers printed in English." Clearly these various complaints are divided in a confused fashion between an appeal to documentary verisimilitude and a distinction between those conventions that are considered acceptable and those that are not. All, of course, accept the convention whereby Sicilians speak English, but none are willing to countenance their doing so with different accents, while Mr. French obviously thinks that they should read newspapers printed in a language other than that in which they converse. At no point is there any attempt to understand *why* these conventions are being used or to consider the possibility that, for example, the 'crisp, Byronic shirts' might have a symbolic function.

"They (the audience) don't listen and that's part of the

1. Raymond Carney, *American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra*, Cambridge University Press 1986, p. 267.

2. A notable exception is Alan Stanbrook's article in, of all places, *Films and Filming* (Feb. 1988, p. 9-11), as well as Stanbrook's review of the film in *Sight and Sound* (Autumn 1988, p. 285-286). Richard Combs' piece in *Monthly Film Bulletin* (no. 657, Oct. 1988, p. 312-313) also contains some interesting observations.

reason why, I think, they respond so well to characters who immediately announce who they are, as good guys or bad guys, so they don't have to work it out or think about it, and for me it's very disturbing because in my life I've never met anyone who was a saint and I've never met anyone who was a devil. I've met a lot of people who had both qualities in unequal measures but I have never met one or the other."

Michael Cimino in a 1991 radio interview with Nigel Andrews.

"Remember that we are all imperfect."

The first line of dialogue in Cimino's first film *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*.

Cimino's relationship to tradition (both filmic and, more generally, the traditions of western culture) can best be characterized as extremely ambivalent. *Heaven's Gate*, for example, defines itself as a western in the tradition of, most obviously, John Ford, and Cimino's commitment to this tradition is undoubtedly sincere: on the other hand the film, with its unconventional, anti-narrative construction, decisively challenges precisely those codes on which most Hollywood films are built. The seeming contradiction here is easily explained, for the tradition of which Ford is a representative is itself marked by a profound ambivalence; the Hollywood western, that is, is best represented not by the endless run of routine 'B' westerns (nor by equally routine 'A' westerns such as *High Noon*) but by the work of Ford, Mann, Peckinpah and Hawks, and it is precisely this tradition that Cimino is a part of, for these works frequently took an oppositional, questioning stance towards the culture of which they were a product. Cimino, then, rather than simply rejecting the western genre (the attitude of the most commercially successful western of the 70's, *Blazing Saddles*) clearly aligns himself with it, the apparent difference being that he redefines the project of its finest representatives by approaching it from a different perspective, challenging generic structures from without rather than from within.

It should not, therefore, be surprising that *The Sicilian*, while in certain minor respects still displaying the structural audacity that marked *The Deer Hunter* and *Heaven's Gate*, returns to a type of narrative construction more compatible with the classical model (in this sense Francesco Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano* is, ironically, more typical of Cimino's work). One might begin by noting David Mansfield's superb score: this seems particularly relevant, since there is clearly a great affinity between Mansfield and Cimino, reminiscent of that between Nino Rota and Fellini, Mansfield's music being perfectly attuned to Cimino's imagery. Robin Wood, writing on *Heaven's Gate*, notes that "David Mansfield's marvelously evocative score never employs more than a handful of instruments, and never attempts the grandiose musical gestures usually expected of the Hollywood epic." In *The Sicilian*, however, just as Cimino returns to a more conventional narrative form, Mansfield's score is full of precisely those 'grandiose musical gestures' which the earlier work rejected. Though Cimino's return to classical narrative is in all probability motivated more by

commercial pressures than artistic ones (it seems unlikely that he would have been allowed to continue in the direction suggested by *Heaven's Gate*), his genuine commitment to this form cannot, I think, be doubted.

This ambivalence as to precisely what kind of attitude to narrative is desirable is clearly the product of Cimino's constantly questioning nature, for his implicit belief that traditional artworks, no matter how radical, are ultimately impotent, incapable of affecting actual change, leads him to experiment with unconventional narrative structures in *The Deer Hunter* and *Heaven's Gate*, and, following the total rejection of the latter by the public, to the attempt to investigate the limitations and potential of traditional form in *The Sicilian*. The scene in which we see Prince Borsa listening to Verdi's *Don Carlo* while remaining oblivious to Mayor Quintana's knocking down Silvio Ferra with his horse, seems to indicate that 'art,' no matter how 'revolutionary,' can ultimately be (mis) used as an object of pure aesthetic contemplation. By foregrounding this attitude within the text of a film which is itself a revolutionary work of art (and there is an obvious parallel between Giuliano's attempt to free Sicily from Italian rule and Carlo and Rodrigo's desire to free Flanders from Spanish rule), this attitude becomes difficult to maintain. One must confront *The Sicilian* on its own terms or (as has actually happened) not at all.

If Cimino is, as I have suggested, concerned with the limitations and potential of traditional narrative, his work is equally concerned with the limitations and potential of 'the hero,' the problem of the heroic individual being central to all of his films (it is easy to see how two of his unrealized projects, *The Fountainhead* and *Blest Souls*, about the Irish patriot Michael Collins, would have shared this concern). It is necessary to stress that the hero is very much of a problem for Cimino, a problem the answer to which can only be tentative. Cimino clearly recognizes that the idea of the heroic individual, no matter what ideology he subscribes to, can ultimately be recuperated for reactionary ends; for various reasons, however, he is unable to simply reject the concept. To Robin Wood, discussing *Year of the Dragon*³, this is evidence of Cimino's "drive towards affirmation": Cimino, that is, though recognizing Stanley White (Mickey Rourke) to be an intolerable figure, is unable to construct a work based simply on negation and so also affirms the character, thus rendering the film incoherent. It is quite possible to see how the film could legitimately be read like this, particularly at that stage in Cimino's development. In retrospect from *The Sicilian*, however, *Year of the Dragon* seems far more coherent. If Cimino would be incapable of making, to take one example out of the many possible, *Rocky*, a film unambiguously committed to its hero, he would be equally incapable of making *Goodfellas*, a film which views the masculine world as a cyclical nightmare and in which the figure of 'the hero' is seen as utterly monstrous. Cimino implicitly sees 'the hero' rather differently than Scorsese, which is not to say that he is necessarily more affirmative of the concept, but rather that his view of it is more complex, more thought out (though Scorsese's is perfectly defensible and thoroughly coherent on its own terms). The problem for Cimino is that by simply rejecting the hero, by demonstrating him to



The wedding party.

be a monster, one loses sight of the reasons that the concept has for so long had such a grip on the imagination. In *Year of the Dragon*, therefore, Cimino balances a critique of the heroic individual that is thorough and uncompromising with a view of him as magnificent. Tag Gallagher, in an admirable study of Ford's *The Searchers*, has observed that...

"Ford shows the 7th Cavalry in its mythic glory, because its myth is an essential portion of its historical actuality. And he shows the searchers responding to that glory, because that is how they felt about the cavalry. But Ford does not thereby glorify the cavalry. On the contrary, he 'frames' the evocation of their glory between scenes of massacred Indians and whipped captives. Without its glory, properly contextualized, the 7th Cavalry cannot be understood."⁴

The problematic ending of *Year of the Dragon*, broadly similar to the ending of Ford's *Fort Apache*, can perhaps be justified by reference to this concept; it is also the central impulse behind both *The Deer Hunter* and *The Sicilian*. Clearly, though, Cimino's attitude towards this magnifi-

cence is in a constant state of evolution. In *Year of the Dragon* it simply exists as part of an attempt to comprehend the hero, understandable either as coldly observed data or as irony but really engaged in a dialectic with both. In *The Sicilian*, however, Cimino proposes the possibility that the magnificence (seen here as the desire to correct social injustice) attributed to the hero might in itself have a certain validity, that its limitation comes from its association with the hero, and that, separated from the hero, it might be something that could be genuinely used; Cimino's constantly probing intelligence, having brought him this far, enables him to take the next logical step (as a lawyer in Rosi's *Salvatore Giuliano* says, "One must have the courage to pursue matters to the end") and suggest that this potential for use can best be realized by the forces of socialism. The radicalism of this, in the context of any Hollywood but more than ever in the Hollywood of the late 80's, is quite literally breathtaking.

3. Robin Wood, "Hero/Anti-Hero: The Dilemma of *Year of the Dragon*," *CineAction* no. 6, Aug. 1986, p. 57-61.

4. Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films*, University of California Press 1986, p. 327.

Robin Wood, writing on *Heaven's Gate*, notes that the film...

"develops the inquiry into the validity of the individual hero that was complexly initiated in *The Deer Hunter*. I wondered how Cimino would follow up the earlier film's insight into the archaism of the individual hero: whether, indeed, in the context of American commercial cinema it could be followed up, as opposed to endlessly reiterated. The move in *Heaven's Gate* towards a concept of the people-as-hero is at once perfectly logical and totally unexpected. It is necessary, however, to stress "move toward": the film, on this level too, is not without its uncertainties and confusion. Averill delays his engagement on the side of the farmers...until the battle appears to be lost: he is nonetheless still able to rally the disintegrating forces and lead them on in the final, almost triumphant charge. If this, too, proves useless, it is less because the individual hero has been effectively discredited than because the powers of monopoly capitalism are too strong."⁵

I have quoted this at length because it so admirably demonstrates the internal coherence and dynamic progression of Cimino's work, making clear the logic with which *The Sicilian* develops the "inquiry into the validity of the individual hero" (I was surprised to find out that Wood does not greatly admire the film). If in *The Deer Hunter* the hero is discredited and in *Heaven's Gate* the people become the hero, then *The Sicilian* combines both of these ideas: the people not only become the hero but are explicitly identified as Communist, and the hero is 'effectively discredited.' Partly this is because Giuliano, unlike *Heaven's Gate*'s James Averill, is not given the excuse of being limited by his class position (as Averill is told by Captain Menardi "You're a rich man, with a good name. You only pretend to be poor"); here the concept of heroism itself is seen as the limitation.

The Sicilian's opening sequence, Professor Hector Adonis' drive through the streets of Palermo, provides an excellent example of Cimino's method. We are shown several shots of buildings, roughly from Adonis' point of view, associated with the Sicilian bourgeoisie. The sensuousness of the photography and lighting serves to demonstrate their beauty, allowing us to appreciate the magnificence of their architecture (Cimino was originally trained as an architect and, as I have already mentioned, once planned a film of *The Fountainhead*). The low angle from which we view them emphasizes their glory, whilst simultaneously making them appear dominating and oppressive. The music used underlines this: it is elegaic, celebrating the glory yet also speaking of sadness and loss (notably in the recurrent tolling of bells). The scene is set at twilight, a time which is neither night nor day. It is clear that Cimino's attitude here, both celebration and condemnation, anticipates his attitude towards Giuliano, something already implicit in the film's opening shot: this begins by fading in on a view, from a low angle, of several buildings; the camera turns to the left and gradually begins to move downwards in a spiralling motion; as it reaches ground level we see the words

'Salvatore Giuliano' written on a wall; Professor Adonis' car then enters the frame, moving from left to right, and the camera begins to follow it, only to stop and track in to a photo surrounded by candles that has just been revealed; as this photo comes towards us, we see that it is of Giuliano, our first view of him in the film (several Cimino films begin with a similar contrast between stillness and movement, usually understandable as introducing a contrast between tradition and the forces of change: the truck that comes roaring under the bridge which shelters the town in *The Deer Hunter*, Dunson's car noisily pulling up outside the tranquil church in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, Nancy's car speeding through the mountain landscape in *Desperate Hours* and, of the most obvious relevance to *The Sicilian*, the opening shot of *Heaven's Gate* with the camera moving down from the high walls of Harvard to reveal James Averill running through the grounds). Camera movement here serves both to compare and contrast; Giuliano is both connected to the buildings, in his combination of magnificence and redundancy, and contrasted to them by virtue of his explicit attempt to bring change to a land where 'nothing changes.' In terms of the film's overall structure these buildings, with their connotations of permanence and privilege, are contrasted with the poverty of Montelepre. This structure, already embryonically Marxist, is, again, far from new in Cimino's work: compare, in *Year of the Dragon*, the cellar in which the Chinese labourers toil with Tracy Tsu's penthouse apartment; in *Heaven's Gate*, Harvard (and later the clubrooms of the Stock Growers' Association) with the poverty of Sweetwater, and, in *The Deer Hunter*, the shot which precedes the wedding sequence, the camera showing us the spires of a magnificent church, then moving down to reveal a derelict drinking from a bottle (one might also mention the contrast in *Desperate Hours* between the tiny jail cell in which Michael Bosworth is held prisoner, and the football stadium where the operation to hunt him down is centered).

Cimino's commitment to the idea of a mass hero might logically be expected to render identification problematic, and to a certain extent this is the case. Robin Wood has argued that "*The Sicilian*, like *Heaven's Gate*, is an epic that precludes identification."⁶ Identification in both *Heaven's Gate* and (for all its return to a more orthodox structure) *The Sicilian* is certainly not that of the Hollywood norm; neither film gives its characters a privileged status and vital information about them is either delayed or withheld. Nevertheless I do not think that any of Cimino's films can be described as 'precluding identification': indeed in one sense this description can be more accurately used to describe the films of Steven Spielberg. One's initial impression of Spielberg's work is that he uses every resource at his disposal to encourage an intense identification with his protagonists, but on reflection it is clear that this is more of a Pavlovian response to certain stimuli, a response that can then be projected on to characters to whom we remain external. One might compare the epilogue of *Heaven's Gate*, for me one of the most moving moments in all of cinema. Despite the fact that our identification with James Averill has been rendered problematic (which is really to say no

more than that it is not the kind to which we are used in Hollywood films) the power of this sequence, which is almost entirely without dialogue, depends on our being able to identify, and emphasize with, not only *what* Averill is feeling at this moment, but *why* he is feeling it.

Identification in *The Sicilian* is of a somewhat different order, Cimino's democratic style opening it up in several interesting ways. One might note the curious use of the moving point of view shot. This type of shot, a camera movement from the viewpoint of a character who is also moving, is something of a Hitchcock trademark and is usually given to a major character. Cimino here uses it in unexpected ways, often giving it to minor characters (to Mayor Quintana, who is riding a horse, during Silvio Ferra's first speech to the peasants; to Professor Adonis during his classroom lecture; to Aspanu as he and Giuliano wait for Passatempo and Terranova; to the Duchess' maid as the Duchess removes her riding clothes; to Passatempo as he searches for Prince Borsa, whom he intends to kidnap) but only once to Giuliano as he mockingly waves at the police during his drive through Palermo. Though we can, to a certain extent, emphasize with Giuliano, there is a sense in which he remains unknowable, for the simple reason that by believing himself to be a mythic hero, an almost godlike figure (he is constantly compared to Christ), he gradually removes himself from the realm of human relationships (at three points in the final section of the film, following the massacre at Porta della Ginestra, he orders people to 'get out' of his car). As the Cardinal that he kidnaps tells him, "You have gone too far my son. You have sailed off the map of this world."

Cimino equates the construction of the mythic hero with the triumph of the death drive, the entry into the realm of legend depending on the suppression of all those human instincts that can only be seen in terms of weakness; the logical end for the hero is that of Mann's *El Cid*, a corpse strapped to a horse, leading an army into battle. Our first view of Giuliano, thanks to the film's flashback structure, is as an image in a photograph, already a mythic figure. When we first see him within the main body of the film he is standing behind a coffin, and it is clear that he wills his own death, rather than retreat into anonymity in America (he had earlier refused the Duchess' suggestion that he go to America, telling her that "Here I'm Giuliano"). The film can be usefully compared to Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*; the famous *Cahiers du Cinema* article on Ford's film⁷ argued that Lincoln was revealed to be a monster, both castrated and castrating. It is clear that this is the project of Cimino's film too (as it is that of both Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* and Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid*, a film Cimino greatly admires). Giuliano's career as a bandit begins when he is shot by the police, and great visual emphasis is given to the gaping wound in his side. The first shots of Giuliano standing behind the coffin also introduce the castrating stare that recurs throughout the film. Robin Wood's complaint that Christopher Lambert "totally lacks the charisma that alone would make Giuliano plausible"⁸ fails to take into account the fact that the film is centrally concerned with the *failure* of charisma. The point constantly made about Giuliano's cas-

trating stare (mainly through the subtlety of Lambert's wonderful performance) is that, more often than not, it fails to castrate, instead turning inward to reflect a basic insecurity and lack of confidence, an apt testament to the denial of emotion which the construction of oneself as a 'man apart' demands, and to the fact that Giuliano is himself the victim of three 'castrating' fathers: Church, Mafia and aristocracy.

Giuliano's construction of himself as a mythic hero, however, is merely one example of the surrender to the death drive indulged in by all of the major characters, with the significant exception of the Communist Silvio Ferra and his sister Giovanna, most obvious in the figure of the Mafia chieftain Don Masino. A distinguishing feature of the death drive, it seems to me, is a neurotic fear of actual death, and it is clear that Masino's concern about his mortality (he expresses the belief that there is a curse on his family and that 'life is hard,' is comically afraid of his soup being poisoned, and describes time as "the enemy of man, the only winner") is morbid and obsessional (Giuliano seems, in this respect, the direct opposite of Masino; clearly, however, it is not simply that he is, in his own words, "not afraid to die," but that, at the film's end, he actively embraces death). One might attach particular importance to his dance with the Duchess in the nightclub during which he tells her how Rome reawakens his 'zest for life'; when she replies that "The only zest Sicilian men have is for death," he moans "Don't say the word," and pulls away from her. (It is worth noting that this theme is actually established in the film's first lines of dialogue, Professor Adonis inquiring to a prison doctor about Aspanu's health and discovering that, despite suffering from tuberculosis, he 'still smokes'.)

As the Duchess' comment makes clear, it is impossible to separate the obsession with death from the society in which it is formed. Sicily is constantly described as unchanging (the recurrent question 'what next?' being apparently answered at the film's end by Professor Adonis' claim that "There is nothing next. There never is. Here") and therefore death orientated. Cimino, however, does not intend us to think of this attitude as being peculiar to Sicily; rather we are encouraged to read it as representing a key point in the film's critique of capitalist society as a whole (Robin Wood's complaint that Cimino "relates rather distantly to a foreign environment"⁹ is completely irrelevant).

The deathliness of Sicilian society is communicated most eloquently through the film's use of circles and repetition. Indeed, it would take a separate article to thoroughly discuss this one aspect. Most obviously there are the three circles that Giuliano draws in the dust outside of the monastery, representing Church, Mafia and aristocracy: when asked which of the three he will join he replies "None,

5. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, Columbia University press 1986, p. 314-315.

6. Robin Wood, 'Michael Cimino' entry in *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers 2: Directors* (second edition), St. James Press 1991, p. 146.

7. The editors of *Cahiers du Cinema*, John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *Cahiers du Cinema* no. 223, 1970. Available in Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods*, University of California Press 1976, p. 493-529.

8. Wood, MCE, 146.

9. Ibid.

I'm over here," and points to a fourth circle. The film's structure is itself circular, constructed as a flashback from Aspanu's cell. As already noted, we first see Giuliano standing behind a coffin, and the film ends with his funeral; he begins, that is, as a legend, is revealed as human and vulnerable, and ends, after his death, once more in the realm of legend, the experience of being near death having already been described in terms of ecstasy in Giuliano's recollection of what it felt like to be shot ("All this hot blood starts to come out. Then you feel wonderful. Immortal").

Other scenes echo or double each other; examples include Aspanu's bedside visit to Professor Adonis and Adonis' bedside visit to Aspanu's cell; Corporal Silvestro's gun failing to fire at Giuliano and Giuliano's gun failing to fire at Don Masino; Giuliano's first and last command to Aspanu to "obey me"; and the two scenes of Don Masino's men guarding the uncultivated land in order to prevent the poor taking possession of it, both scenes containing a shot of Prince Borsa, who is watching the events through a tele-

scope, walking in a circle around his room (this use of repetition to evoke a deathlike feeling of circularity — an inescapable structure representing an inescapable society — can also be seen in Scorsese's *After Hours*).

Phrases, too, constantly recur, either within the same scene ("I kiss your hand," "I have always known we would be friends") or, more relevantly, at various points throughout, the latter usually themselves emphasizing the sense of entrapment within an unchanging social system: the repeated questions 'what else?' and 'what next?'; the constant claim that 'nothing changes' in Sicily. We are, then, given the sense that capitalist society is a closed circle (note again the opening shot of the buildings of Palermo, with the camera spiralling down), dominated by the death drive, and that the only potential for breaking the circle is represented by the Communists. Though Giuliano is, in many ways, a force for change, his limitation is revealed by the act of constructing himself as a fourth circle; he merely repeats the structures that he imagines himself to be challenging, while



Christopher Lambert as Salvatore Giuliano.

the Communists attempt to redefine them.

The cult of the individual which Giuliano subscribes to is seen as, in many ways, a positive thing. It is notable that Giuliano, his men and the Communists Silvio and Giovanna Ferra are all seen as individuals, while the various establishment figures are never referred to simply by their names, but by their titles: *Prince Borsa*, *Don Masino*, *Minister Trezza*, *Professor Adonis*, *Corporal Silvestro*, *Doctor Nattore*, *the Duchess* (only Prince Borsa calls her Camilla) and *the Cardinal*. In this context, Giuliano's claiming that he is "not just a bandit" is an act of monumental hubris. Nevertheless, it is precisely Giuliano's belief in the autonomous power of the individual, alongside his rejection of the collective (as he tells Prince Borsa "I hate politics. I also believe in God"), that ultimately renders him incapable of affecting any real change, and is constantly demonstrated to be a form of naivety, most obviously in the scene in which he reveals to the Duchess his belief that President Truman could, if he so desired, annex Sicily as an American state, and in his ordering the Cardinal he kidnaps to "tell the people that the Church will bless them if they take possession of the uncultivated land of Sicily" (as the Cardinal tells him, "I am not the Church"). Most revealing is the conversation with Prince Borsa, during which Borsa claims to be "like the south wind from Africa. I've always been here. You haven't"; when Aspanu then tells him that if his ransom is not paid soon "you won't be here much longer," he replies "then my son will be the Prince, and the south wind continues" (in this sense, Don Masino's son's decision to declare his individuality by becoming an entomologist is similar to Giuliano's, and Masino's adoption of Giuliano as a more acceptable son becomes somewhat ironic). Giuliano is constantly shown to be motivated by visions of personal glory (he compares himself to Alexander the Great, claims that he will "Save the world," and tells Giovanna that "All I want is for them to know that I did this, for them"; at one point he even attempts to enlist the film's audience in his project, delivering the line "Who says there is no fire from Heaven in Sicily?" straight to camera) and, though he is in many ways a glorious figure, his individualism is precisely what allows him to be used by the 'three circles' (in Aspanu's meeting with the Cardinal, Prince Borsa and Don Masino) and enlisted in the fight against Communism. Cimino's attitude towards Giuliano is summed up by the film's final shot, the vision of Giuliano on his horse. Certainly his appearance, with the horse rearing up as if attempting to reach the sun overhead (the sun being the last of the film's circular images) is impressive, but the pose he strikes is identical to the earlier one which appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine, and is therefore associated with his narcissism; he is also juxtaposed, on the left of the image, with a tree, symbol of life and growth, and on the right with a cross, emblem both of the Church (one of the unchanging institutions of Sicily) and, more directly, of the cemetery in which he is buried (death). This image, therefore, brackets Giuliano's glory between both his true potential and his final limitation.

Cimino's view of the way in which Giuliano's potential as a force of change could be realised is represented by the

ring which passes from the Duchess (who was originally given it by Prince Borsa) to Giuliano, but is finally given to a peasant boy who wants 'land.' This motif (also present in *Desperate Hours*), while obviously demonstrating the transfer of power, is also connected to the film's recurrent marriage imagery. In order to understand the precise function of this imagery it is necessary to look at Cimino's attitude towards heterosexuality/homosexuality and, intimately connected to this, the role of women in his work.

American cinema, reflecting American society, has two complementary roles which it assigns to women: the mother and the whore. Cimino's films are notable for their resistance to this. Although his female characters are often associated with cleanliness (indeed *Heaven's Gate*, *Year of the Dragon*, *The Sicilian* and *Desperate Hours* all contain scenes showing a woman bathing), it is only in *Desperate Hours* that the woman desires a relationship of sexual exclusivity; Linda in *The Deer Hunter* and Ella in *Heaven's Gate* are able to love two men equally, while Tracy in *Year of the Dragon* claims (she may be lying) to have another lover besides Stanley White (this pattern of a woman involved with two men is also suggested in *Desperate Hours*). The Duchess Camilla in *The Sicilian* is, in this sense, Cimino's most fully thought out female character, a conscious attempt to resolve the mother/whore dichotomy in the terms of a woman who is totally aware of her position; as she says to Don Masino, in Sicily "all women are either Madonnas or whores."

As this comment indicates, the Duchess' position within the film is structurally identical to that of Billy Irvine (John Hurt) in *Heaven's Gate*, the character with the shrewdest, most intelligent sense of the injustice of the society of which he is a part, unable to act because of his privileged position within it. The Duchess' intelligence is revealed at several points, most notably in the statement quoted above, in her telling Prince Borsa that she approves of giving land to the peasants, and her telling a police officer that "It's very unlike a village boy to kill a policeman. It's usually the other way around isn't it?"

The Duchess' involvement with three men (Giuliano, Prince Borsa and her unseen husband) points up her similarity to several of Renoir's heroines (especially Elena/Ingrid Bergman in *Eléna et les hommes*); like them her sexually promiscuous nature (when she laughs at Giuliano's American army shorts, he angrily observes that she "must have seen a lot of them when the army was here") is an affront to the narrow morality of a society in which, as Don Masino says, "the family is everything."

Desperate Hours, though it is far from being one of Cimino's most fully achieved works, takes on a special interest when seen from this perspective, also perhaps the most useful one from which to account for its failure. The bedroom of the Cornell house, in which most of the film is set, is dominated by two paintings, one of a woman dressed in a respectable fashion, the other of a woman reclining with her breasts exposed. The mother/whore opposition is here partially divided out into two characters, the faithful wife, Nora Cornell, and Nancy Dwyers, an obviously highly sexual woman whom the film seems to feel the need to degrade and humiliate. The implicit connection between

these two women is reinforced by Nora's wedding ring, which Michael Bosworth steals and gives to Nancy, and by the third female character, FBI agent Brenda Chandler, who is first seen as a reflection in a two-way mirror, spying on Nancy (in a scene cut by the studio she convinces Nancy to help capture Bosworth by first telling her of how she too once loved a violent man, then kissing her on the lips); at the film's climax she looks with confusion and longing at both the sexual Nancy and Nora's reunited family, recognizing her failure, as a masculine woman, to conform to either ideal, to be either the mother or the whore. In this sense she is in a direct line of descent from Ella and the Duchess, but the film's limitations can be seen by looking at the way in which traditional roles are reestablished; the family is reunited, the sexual woman contained (by being handcuffed) and the masculine woman castrated (the shot in the leg). The unsatisfactory nature of this ending, however, is itself revealing (we certainly register the handcuffing of the blood-drenched and quite helpless Nancy as monstrous, and it is clear that we view the family reunion through Brenda's eyes, and thus remain external to it), and we might note that as Brenda walks limpingly away from the family that she has helped to bring together, unable to belong with them and incapable of the overt sexuality of Nancy, she reminds us of Ethan Edwards at the end of *The Searchers* (the reference to Ford's film is presumably intentional).

The nearest equivalent to Nora in *The Sicilian* is Giovanna, Giuliano's fiancée. Feminine, clear-skinned and sexually faithful, she is something of a stereotype, though clearly, through her intelligence, her Communism and her refusal to surrender to the death drive, a very sympathetic one. Cimino's inability to realize her fully as a character can surely be referred to the film's lack of interest in heterosexual relationships. The treatment of marriage is particularly revealing: Giuliano's attempt to set himself apart from the 'three circles' of the Church, the aristocracy and the Mafia is a total failure, and he ends up 'married' to all three. The imagery associated with Giuliano's marriage to the Church, his completing the Cardinal's Mass and dressing in a ceremonial robe when he delivers money to Giovanna, is fairly imprecise, but the marriage to both aristocracy and Mafia is reinforced through both visuals and dialogue. The ring which Giuliano steals from the Duchess simultaneously indicates both his seizing of power and his aligning himself, for the first time, with the forces of conservatism; after he places the ring on his finger, the Duchess says "With this ring I do thee wed." Clearly the Duchess, shown as in many ways the most intelligent and aware character in the film (though both this film and Cimino's work in general are hardly lacking in intelligent characters compromised by their position within the power structure; as *Heaven's Gate*'s Captain Menardi says "It's not me, it's the rules"), recognizes the fact that Giuliano (who soon reveals the extent of his naivety when he tells her of his plans to have President Truman annex Sicily) will be unable to affect change and, finally caught in the circles of power (the ring itself being circular), will soon begin the downward spiral (initiated in the camera movement with which the film began) towards

compromise and death (when he refuses the suggestion that he go to America, telling the Duchess that "Here I'm Giuliano," she replies "Not for long I'm afraid"): as he leaves her room she tells him to keep the ring and, as his figure retreats into the distance, gradually growing smaller before disappearing round a corner, she repeats, with an inexpressible sadness, her earlier line, "With that ring I do thee wed."

Giuliano's marriage to the Mafia takes place during his meeting with Don Masino. Masino, as he is driven to the meeting, is told by Abbot Manfredi, who accompanies him, that he "looks like a bridegroom": he replies by telling Manfredi "Then you must perform the service." When Masino then encounters him, Giuliano is standing behind a lace curtain and, as they greet each other, with Masino gently caressing and kissing his face, then embracing him passionately, the curtain billows around Giuliano, looking alike a bridal veil.

It does not seem to me an exaggeration to describe this scene, both passionate and tender, as the film's 'love scene' (though the two men soon retreat into the safety and formality of repeated phrases such as "I have always known we would be friends" and "I kiss your hand"). It is certainly more vivid than any of the encounters between Giuliano and either the Duchess or Giovanna; the lovemaking of the former is not seen (compare the Linda/Michael love scene in *The Deer Hunter*) and, in contrast to the lavish 'weddings' described above, the wedding ceremony of the latter is not shown, only its aftermath. We are, then, dealing with the homosexual subtext present in so much of Cimino's work. Giuliano is often shown as a feminized character, and it must have been this that Cimino had in mind when he cast the French actor Christopher Lambert in the role, for Lambert's face has a gentle, smooth and almost feminine quality which, combined with its ability to signify a mythic individual, removed from the struggles of ordinary men, reinforces the character's ambiguous sexual presence. At three points in the film Giuliano is literally placed in the female position: in the 'bridal veil' scene mentioned above; in the attack on the prison barracks, during which he pretends to be a woman (recalling Jeff Bridges' disguise during the robbery in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*); and in his seduction by the Duchess, during which she reverses roles, playing the part which Giuliano (who has come to steal the 'jewels' which the Duchess keeps locked in her bedroom) is expected to play, telling him that "If you don't rape me, I shall have to rape you" and, after he describes her as 'beautiful,' informing him that "that makes two of us" (just as in *Heaven's Gate* Averill, after telling his dancing partner at Harvard that she is 'beautiful,' is told "so are you"; additionally, as Robin Wood has noted¹⁰, the theme music of *The Deer Hunter* was, prior to the film's release, popularized as a song with the words "He was so beautiful").

The homosexual overtones of the encounter between Giuliano and Don Masino are all the more interesting when we consider the fact that the relationship between the two is explicitly that of father and son (when Minister Trezza, after discussing Giuliano with Masino, asks him "What news of your son?", Masino replies "I have been giving you news of



Don Masino (Joss Ackland), centre.

my son. Could you not tell"). It is curious that, since "In Sicily the family is everything," Giuliano's real parents play practically no part in the film. His father is, we presume from the one time he is mentioned, dead (Professor Adonis tells Giuliano that when Giovanna arrives in America "She will be protected by the same family your father worked for in New York"). This absence of the father reinforces Giuliano's attempt to create himself as a mythic hero; as Professor Adonis says beside his grave "He was his own father. He invented himself." In this sense Giuliano is like Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* who declared "I'll never/Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand/As if a man were author of himself/And knew no other kin." (V. iii. 34-37. *Coriolanus* is also in many ways an important reference point for several other Cimino films; compare *Coriolanus* and Lartius wagering their horses (I. iv. 1-7) with Michael and Nick gambling for Nick's truck near the beginning of *The Deer Hunter*; *Coriolanus* also greatly resembles Stanley White in *Year of the Dragon*). As for Giuliano's mother, she too is only mentioned once, this time in the form of a revealing joke. During Giuliano and Giovanna's drive through Palermo on their

way to a nightclub, the following dialogue takes place...

GIOVANNA: Did anyone ever tell you that you were a show-off?

GIULIANO: My mother.

GIOVANNA: What did you do when she said that?

GIULIANO: I shot her.

GIOVANNA: I don't think that's funny.

GIULIANO: Okay, I'll never make a joke again.

GIOVANNA: Not that kind. Not to me.

If the lack of passion in Giuliano's relationship with Giovanna is due to his commitment to the masculine world of action, it is clear that this commitment is itself merely a disguise for a repressed homosexuality. As the dialogue quoted above indicates, Giuliano has reversed the Oedipus complex, killing his mother and making love to his father (Don Masino). Giuliano's total lack of self-knowledge (when he tells the Cardinal "Whatever I've been, I was not just a bandit. I was..." he is unable to complete the sentence) is

10. Wood, *HVFTR*, p. 294.

what ultimately enables him to be recuperated by the power elite, and it is his recognition of the extent to which he has been used that leads him to attempt the assassination of Don Masino. This desperate attempt to both demonstrate his independence and, by asserting the phallus and killing the father, complete the Oedipal trajectory, is doomed to failure: the phallus is revealed as impotent and the father remains alive.

Aspanu Pisciotto's role in the film both parallels and contradicts Giuliano's. His initial appearances seem to characterize him as being a stereotypically 'macho' male. His attitude to women is first made clear during his visit to Professor Adonis' bedroom; as he prepares to leave, he tells Adonis "I'm off to Palermo"; when Adonis asks him if he intends "to steal," Aspanu replies "and meet some women. What else?".

We next see Aspanu as he drives, with Adonis and Giovanna, to meet Giuliano in the monastery where he is recovering. Aspanu and Giovanna are extremely hostile to each other (as they were during their previous meeting), Aspanu's explanation for this being that "Giuliano hates political women. So do I." One need only remove the word 'political' to understand what Aspanu's true attitude is, and, as subsequently becomes clear, his feelings towards Giovanna are rooted in jealousy. The nature of Aspanu's relationship with Giuliano is implied when they meet at the monastery: the two men embrace, Aspanu telling Giuliano "You look good"; Giuliano comments on Aspanu's new moustache (just as Michael comments on Stan's in *The Deer Hunter*) and Aspanu tells him "It excites women. You should grow one too"; they then walk, arm in arm, talking and laughing, over to the car where Giovanna waits. As Giuliano embraces her almost formally, the music on the soundtrack, which had up to this point been passionate and joyous, changes to a slow piano piece. After the embrace Giovanna tells Giuliano, who is wearing an Abbot's robe, "You make a handsome priest"; on the word 'priest' Cimino

cuts to a close-up of Aspanu, whose head moves back as if he had just been struck. The look on his face could only be described as one of extreme jealousy. As the three then discuss Giuliano's plan to stay in the mountains as a bandit, Aspanu almost casually decides to join him, commenting "What do I care for Palermo? Bright lights, women" (the hunting trips in *The Deer Hunter* also involve a male group escaping into the mountains, the second trip being explicitly described as including "no women...just like old times"). The climax of this sequence, set in the garden outside the monastery, strikingly confirms this reading and should be described in some detail:

1. A close-up of Giovanna looking sad.
2. Giovanna, Giuliano and Professor Adonis; Adonis takes Giovanna's hand and draws her away; Giuliano moves toward her.
3. A close-up of Giovanna and Giuliano as they kiss.
4. The back of Giovanna's head as the kiss ends; shadows play across her face as Adonis leads her away.
5. A close-up of Giuliano facing slightly towards screen right; he has a blank look (which we interpret as sadness) on his face.
6. Giovanna as at end of 4; she looks away from Giuliano, then glances back.
7. Giuliano as at 5; his eyes move screen left.
8. A close-up of Aspanu smiling radiantly, almost triumphantly.
9. The backs, in shadow, of Giovanna and Adonis as they walk away.
10. A distant shot of the backs of Aspanu and Giuliano as they walk away in the opposite direction, talking; the camera, while maintaining its distance, tracks slightly forward in order to follow them.

Giovanna's situation here, as one woman involved with three men, is somewhat similar to that of the Duchess.

Prince Borsa (Terence Stamp) guarded by Passatempo (Andreas Katsulas).



However, while the Duchess either exploits men or relates to them as equals, Giovanna, despite her intelligence, is here the manipulated rather than the manipulator; literally dragged from a heterosexual encounter by one male so that the homosexual relationship of two other males can be realized, she gradually disappears into the shadows, rendered superfluous. Aspanu's delight at this situation is obvious, but the blank expression on Giuliano's face (which cynics will doubtless attribute to the supposed inadequacies of Lambert's performance), though it can be read as indicating sadness, renders his reaction somewhat ambiguous. These four characters are also seen together during the scene in which Giuliano announces his intention to emigrate to America with Giovanna, and Aspanu's reaction (he glances nervously at Professor Adonis) suggests the real reason that, soon afterwards, he meets with Don Masino and agrees to kill Giuliano.

With the two men now free from the constrictions of civilization, the true nature of Aspanu's relationship with Giuliano comes closer to the surface in the next scene, the attack on the prison barracks, during which Giuliano pretends to be a woman. As Aspanu, striking a macho posture, gestures at Giuliano, complaining that "She's drunk, the bitch. There's only one thing she's good for," Cimino cuts to a close-up of Giuliano smiling (in amusement at the guards being fooled by his disguise, or in recognition of the truth of Aspanu's statement?). Giuliano then reveals himself to Corporal Silvestro by brandishing a gun at him while ordering "Drop your belt Corporal" and, after Silvestro's "So the bitch is Giuliano," telling him to "Unlock your cage Mister Silvestro."

It is notable that the only woman we see Aspanu with is Giovanna. Interestingly the cut version of the film (not prepared by Cimino), apart from deleting much footage, actually includes one scene, Aspanu's rape of the Duchess' maid, which Cimino shot but did not include in his 'director's cut' (similarly, as Giuliano moves to embrace Giovanna at the end of the scene in which he first brings her money for the poor, the short version includes a shot of them kissing, while Cimino's cuts to an all-male band playing outside). Cimino's decision not to use this scene, alongside the similar decision not to show Michael and Linda making love in *The Deer Hunter* and to only hint at what took place during Lightfoot's evening with Melody in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, can be seen as an attempt to define Aspanu's sexuality as ambiguous by refusing to demonstrate his heterosexuality.

Aspanu's relationship with Giovanna, then, reflects the character's growth during the film. Initially hostile to her, he is supposedly committed to Giuliano, but the men's relationship can only exist by denying its homosexual element: their comments on each other's physical attractiveness, in the discussion of Aspanu's moustache, being concluded with an attempt to root them in a shared heterosexuality ("It attracts women. You should grow one"). As the film develops, however, Aspanu shows evidence of growing to accept the sexual nature of his feelings for Giuliano. Whereas, near the beginning of the film, he told Professor Adonis that he was going to Palermo to "meet some women. What else?", towards the end, when Giuliano (fol-

lowing Adonis' "Well Aspanu, perhaps the time has come to think of yourself") tells him to leave, he replies "No. I stay here. What else?".

This growing maturity is accompanied by a new respect for Giovanna, the earlier hostility being replaced by a desire to dance with her at the wedding reception (where, with Giovanna the only woman present, the men dance with each other, as they do in *The Deer Hunter's* wedding reception, foregrounding the nature of the relationships which the male group exists to sustain), partly because his growing maturity means that he no longer has any reason to feel hostile or jealous (though, with the dissolution of the male group and Giuliano's decision to emigrate to America with Giovanna, the jealousy does return, partly because, as with the Michael/Linda/Nick triangle in *The Deer Hunter*, it is a way of becoming closer to his male lover ("May I dance with your lady, Lord?"): tellingly, after dancing with Giovanna, he turns to Giuliano's second-in-command Passatempo and begins dancing with him.

Thus, as Giuliano gradually removes himself from all human ties, subduing his humanity as a means of becoming a mythic figure of authority, Aspanu rejects the 'masculine' role through his deepening commitment to his friend. The scene on the boat, in which Aspanu is unable to go through with the assassination of Giuliano which he has been ordered to carry out, provides the film's most touching moment; Giuliano tells Aspanu, who is pointing a gun at him, to "Pull the trigger"; Aspanu replies "I can't. I love you." This moment strikingly recalls the climax of *The Deer Hunter*, in which Michael almost succeeds in saving Nick's life by telling him the same thing. Both of these relationships (like that of *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*), however, are ironically ended by the death of one partner at the moment of greatest potential (or perhaps at the moment when the contradictions of social structures which Cimino is exploring can be pushed no further; interestingly the heterosexual relationships of Giuliano and Giovanna and of Averill and Ella in *Heaven's Gate* are also ended by death, but at a point where we feel that the relationship has already failed). Giuliano, now beyond all human contact, repeats his earlier order, "Obey me," and is killed. Aspanu's acceptance of his own female side is finally confirmed by one small detail; during his last appearance in the prison cell, where he is poisoned by Professor Adonis, he is working on an embroidery, a traditionally feminine activity.

It should, then, finally be possible to answer the questions which are continually asked, by various characters, throughout the film: 'What next?' and 'What else?'. Though the former seems to be answered negatively in the final line of dialogue (Professor Adonis' "There is nothing next. There never is. Here"), the more positive answer, to which the entire film leads, is in the hope of change embodied by the Communists. The question 'What else?', first posed in the context of an enquiry about heterosexuality ("Meet some women. What else?"), is ultimately answered with an affirmation of homosexuality ("I stay here. What else?"). It is this ability to link the sexual with the political, Freud with Marx, that accounts for the intelligence and radicalism of what I take to be one of Cimino's finest achievements.

The Rapture

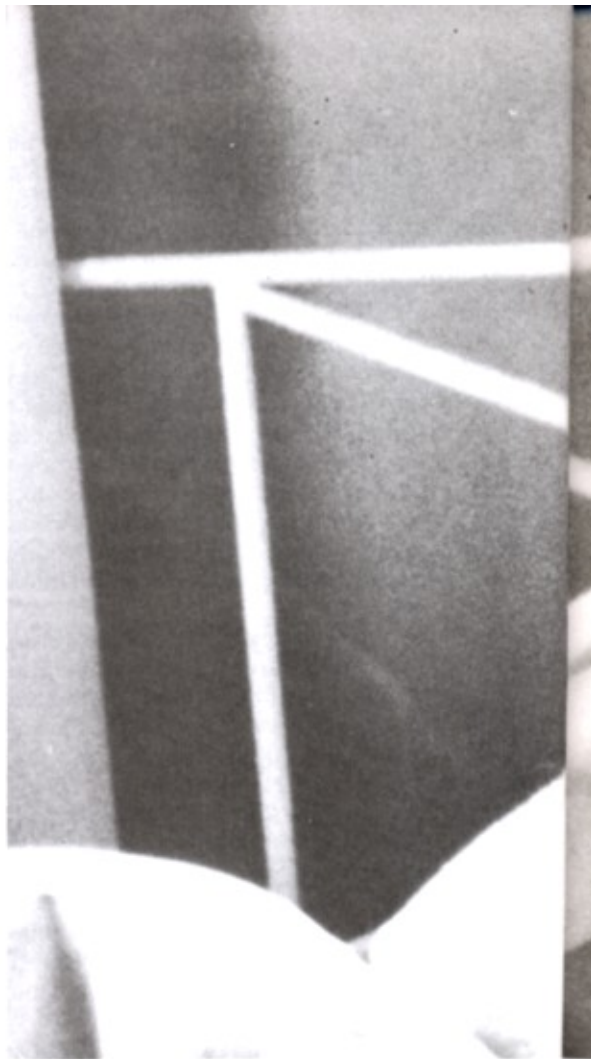
A WOMAN'S FILM OF THE 90'S

by Florence Jacobowitz

What does *The Rapture* have to do with Hollywood, and, more precisely, what defines a contemporary Hollywood movie? *The Rapture's* director/auteur, Michael Tolkin, also authored *The Player*, and scripted the Altman film based on the novel; I will pass up the opportunity to comment on this overrated work, but one might surmise that Tolkin chose purposely, as his directorial debut, a film which is as far from *Lethal Weapon III* as is conceivably possible. *The Player* perpetuates the assumption to those 'in the Know,' that Hollywood is a hermetic factory producing trite, safe, homogenous products. (This is a familiar argument; classical Hollywood is also often described in the same way, as an industry that produced sameness with different labels.) There is evidence, however, that independent, individual projects are appearing with somewhat greater frequency. The producers of *The Rapture*, Nick Wechsler, Nancy Tenenbaum, and Karen Koch and executive producer Laurie Parker, list among their credits other anomalous works like *Drugstore Cowboy*; *sex, lies and videotape*; and *My Own Private Idaho*. There is also a wide range of filmmakers from Spike Lee to Jonathan Demme who are producing films that are difficult to categorize, so there is a market, however select or qualified, for motion pictures which are

something else — not 'movies,' not easily continued as a sequel, non-formulaic. I am not suggesting that the latter are automatically preferable or more valuable. *Godfather III* and *Alien III* are complex, fascinating movies/sequels which soar above the Coen brothers 'quirky' individual output, but the point is that projects which might initially seem less marketable, less safe, perhaps more audacious, are getting made in Hollywood.

The question of what defines a Hollywood movie is, and always has been, difficult to pinpoint. One way of approaching the question might be through an examination of what a certain culture at a particular historical moment deems pleasurable or entertaining. Although classical Hollywood was always flexible enough to include individual, transformative work (like that of Sternberg, Welles, Hitchcock) the industry often stipulated that narratives ended in reconciliation and/or variations of the moral Happy Ending. Although this is not, and never was airtight (bitter unhappy happy endings have a long history in Hollywood) one can say that certain experiences and subjects remain less likely to be dramatized in popular mainstream cinema, as they are deemed not entertaining for a variety of social/ideological reasons, and the demand for





The Rapture

some sense of closure and reassuring coherence remains high.

It is perhaps easier to think of *The Rapture* as belonging to the tradition of the European art film, particularly of the late 60's or 70's. Bergman's *Persona* (1967) comes to mind: it, too, is centred on a woman's consciousness and probes the overwhelming feeling of emptiness, numbness, the anesthetized existence often associated with post-war European art. Pasolini's *Medea* (1970) is also reminiscent in that there, too, a woman kills her children and chooses death as a release from oppression. Driven to madness, she confronts the audience with the warning that "nothing is possible any more." Like these works, *The Rapture* is audacious in its dramatization of the central protagonist's relentless search for a release from a routinized life-as-death existence, and in its movement towards an ending which is intensely subjective, bleak and highly symbolic. One can safely say that it is not formulaic, but it would be a mistake to think of it as unconventional.

I recently surprised myself and astonished a class of students when I chose to screen *The Rapture* as a closing film in a course on the melodrama. It seemed so clear to me that the film is firmly rooted in the traditions of the melodrama,

both as a mode which crosses through literature, theatre and early cinema, and as the genre which evolved in Hollywood in the 30's (manifesting itself as the 'woman's film') and resurging in the 50's in a variety of forms. While I think that *The Rapture* stretches the conventions to address contemporary concerns, it is highly melodramatic in a variety of ways. It has been theorized that the melodrama evolved and grew in a secular bourgeois culture lacking a defined moral frame — a world in which there no longer is a clear sense of right and wrong or a reason for being. Melodrama is a heightened mode which dramatizes emotional, subterranean states in the same way that Expressionist art dramatizes subjective states. It is more important to communicate what it feels like to be trapped, frustrated, numb, in despair. Characters blindly move through life, repressing their energies often to the verge of explosion. The narratives dramatize crises which are exaggerated; the feeling of claustrophobia and blockage is common. Characters in search of coherence, a clear identity and comfort regularly experience alienation, betrayal and cruelty. Protagonists lose their direction and their place; they cannot articulate what it is they want and why they can't find it in the society around them. The melodrama communicates

intensity, an emotionalized world which most times feels like a prison, a dark nightmare. This crisis of displacement, of identity and of being crosses through the melodrama and film noir (where a male sensibility is most commonly central). The melodramatic imagination is activated by particular social conditions. It feeds off the insecurities and contradictions of a particular social moment, seeking to account for pervasive loneliness and desperation.

The Rapture revives the ethos, sensibility and conventions of melodrama and asks: What does it feel like to be alive in the 90's? Given the emphasis placed on Sharon's/Mimi Rogers experience, one might specify and ask — What does it feel like to be a woman nominally alive in the 90's? — and so the film moves into that area of the woman's film of the 30's, where one might describe a recurring thematic as what does she want and why can't she have it?

As illustrated in *Cineaction* #26/27 on the melodrama, the female star is critical to the articulation of these concerns. *The Rapture* dramatizes Sharon's consciousness — it is her nightmare that the spectator is asked to acknowledge and share. As with many of the great women's films of the 30's, the narrative depends on the lead protagonist's performance to make sense of the melodramatic excess and depth of trauma laid bare. Without Mimi Rogers the film would collapse; her nuanced performance is breathtaking in terms of the range the character must communicate. She mediates the shifts from conscious to 'dream' state, and it is her persona's intelligence, sexuality and strength which give meaning to the character's search for, discovery and finally, rejection of an absolute commitment to a religious canon in a world where the risk of what is at stake is nothing less than life and death.

The Rapture confronts many of the experiences of contemporary life which are rarely, if ever, addressed through mainstream entertainment, drawing on the familiar terrain of the melodrama as its base. It is set within a landscape of 'senseless' mass killings and addresses the resurgence of the various manifestations of fundamentalist Christianity. The narrative is centred on a displaced heroine whose clearest sensation oscillates between emptiness and pain. Michael Tolkin commented cryptically in an interview (quoted in the press kit production notes, Fine Line Features Release) that the idea for the film germinated in two cultural sources: a bumper sticker warning that "in case of rapture, this car will be unmanned" and a newspaper story of a woman who inexplicably threw her children off a bridge. The film, like melodrama, investigates the *extreme* response: What social conditions need exist to drive a mother to kill her children, and in which same social conditions does fundamentalism thrive — i.e., religious beliefs which are expressed in the most mundane aspects of the material and the concrete?

The Rapture's long establishing shot introduces Sharon, its protagonist, within a *mise-en-scène* which could be a contemporary remake of Mizoguchi's *Osaka Elegy*, where one finds Isuzu Yamada at the switchboard. The camera cranes up along the blackness of a room divider, and moves over a cold barren room where a multitude of heads are barely visible between the pigeon-hole cubicles. The room is lit by eerie artificial lighting and the hum of typing,

echoes, and the drone of indistinct human voices are heard; men and women are seated before identical terminals, wearing identical headphones, repeating parts of the same operator's speech. The image succinctly communicates mechanistic routine, confinement and a sense of otherworldliness. The camera moves over the room and stops at Sharon; she is introduced as operator 134 and the only hints of individual difference are the sighs which punctuate the cyclical pattern of her information service. The following scene introduces Sharon outside of the workplace. It provides a strong visual contrast to the opening in every conceivable way — the scene takes place outdoors, in the evening, and Sharon is riding through the streets in an open convertible, hair blowing, dressed evocatively in a tight black dress which emphasizes her body. The edit, however, links both worlds. Sharon and Vic/Patrick Bachau cruise airports and bars looking for partners with whom they can have sex. Responding to a stranger's dare, "What if things get out of control?" Sharon states that control has nothing to do with it and adds that she hasn't found her limits yet. Sharon and Vic exploit cruising as a means of immediate, risky, short-term visceral pleasure but the *mise-en-scène* and the alternating scenes between work and after work inform the spectator that both experiences are similarly routinized and mundane. The *mise-en-scène* of airport bars, hotel rooms or furniture displays again emphasizes artificially lit, impersonal environments, and the couples' faces interchange while they remain nameless. One man asks Sharon after sex, "Was that far enough?" to which she responds, "Randy, right?" Vic, who "likes to watch" is even further removed. Sharon's leisure time is a perfect corollary to her time spent at work; both are marked by the total absence of emotional or intellectual commitment and both leave Sharon bored, blasé and unimpressed.

Randy's/David Duchovny revelatory admission in bed of having murdered someone fails to elicit a response from Sharon (she politely asks, "For how much...?") but the discovery of an enormous tattoo which covers the entire back of one of the women she and Vic meet fascinates her: she persists in questioning why the woman would get a tattoo given the pain involved, etc. The tattoo is a manifestation of extreme commitment — one would really have to want it and one lives with it forever. It serves as a symbol and is, ironically, Sharon's introduction to religion; the dream, the pearl, prayer and salvation for the few are the seeds of a concept of spirituality and God which begin to germinate.

The Rapture clearly places Sharon's yearning for community, purpose and imminent salvation within the broader frame of her day-to-day life which is characterized by isolation and a sense of aimlessness. In one scene Sharon is seated alone in a barren lunchroom, lit with artificial light and decorated with a poorly executed mural of a nature scene. She overhears a discussion of a religious event that will soon take place. After Sharon learns of the dream of the pearl from the woman with the tattoo, there is another similar scene in the lunchroom; Sharon again is isolated from the group, but this time she strikes up a conversation, trying to learn more. She claims to have dreamed of the pearl but the group reject her attempt at entry and tell her to wait and pray.

Ironically, Sharon's existence is already characterized by waiting. When Randy asks her in bed, presumably after they've had sex, "What was your best year?" Sharon answers, "I guess I'm still waiting. Everything seems so empty; time passes so quickly... A day is always just over." A scene following underlines her words. We see Sharon at home in an apartment which is as bland, characterless and typical as the workspaces or cruising locations. Sharon tosses her magazine, sits in her recliner and waits. Two men come to her door peddling a form of Christian evangelism. Their message is extreme and is placed as a threat: "Accept Jesus, otherwise, you won't be saved. You have to believe; if you don't, you go to hell." Sharon notes that this hardly seems fair (the film is punctuated with dry humour throughout), even though what is being offered is nothing less than a personal relationship with the son of God. "I was like you," they tell her and her tired response is simply, "I doubt it."

This series of cumulative short scenes culminates in a turning point where Sharon chooses to act — to stop watching and force a change in the pattern of her life. The action is a form of protest, and one that is repeated at key points in the film, with varying degrees of awareness. One night when she is in bed with Randy, Sharon is suddenly seized by an intense hysterical energy; she gets up, gets Randy out of bed and begins to remake it. The 'hysteria' relates to excess often found in the woman's film — the spilling over of pent-up despair repressed too long. Sharon claims that the bed is unclean, and explains, "I'm starting over, Randy — I've had enough. I need a new direction in my life. There is a God, I know it. There is a God and I'm going to meet him... I want to be clean... I want my salvation." She proceeds to shower with boiling hot water, in an attempt to cleanse herself physically and symbolically. Randy tries to counter her outburst and rationalizes that there is no God, that guilt is a result of social conditioning and that people feel frustrated by their powerlessness, by the inability to change a world in a state of disaster. "You hate your job, you hate your life, you want to feel special." Sharon, flossing away, refuses to accept this. She talks of a spiritual need "just as real as hunger" and tells Randy and herself that "there has to be something more — I'm tired of the pain in my life, I'm tired of feeling empty all the time." Randy leaves telling Sharon "there is no God." The scene ends with Sharon alone, reading her bible in bed, sobbing and praying, "God, please, please help me... God, I'm lost."

In the following sequence Sharon's blindness is visualized by the dark sunglasses she wears while driving her car. It is a common motif in the melodrama (Mrs. Harper's/Joan Bennett obscured vision is similarly suggested in *The Reckless Moment*, as is Katherine Joyce's/Ingrid Bergman in *Voyage in Italy*) highlighting the point that Sharon is indeed lost and cannot find her way. The spectator watches Sharon drive and a progressive distancing from the protagonist becomes more evident. Sharon picks up a hitchhiker who rambles on with a monologue as Sharon is unresponsive. (The scene is, again, dryly funny. The young man describes his surprise at having been picked up, "You think I'm dangerous; you're probably right — I've seen myself... I'd never give me a lift if I was a chick, no double fucking way...") He

tells Sharon, incidentally, that he has a gun and has spent time in jail and Sharon exploits the opportunity to take him to a motel room to appropriate his gun. It is significant that this scene precedes Sharon's first attempt to end her life. It evidences her disregard for the limits imposed upon women. Sharon's protest to women's confinement and their vulnerable position is expressed in her nightly anonymous sexual encounters or in her courting danger and picking up someone who might assault her. These are forms of a death wish, or, at least, a longing for an experience which would jolt her, or would offer her a release from emptiness and pain. Sharon's choices suddenly become clear: she can blow her head off or try God as an alternative strategy of escape from her life. And although Sharon doesn't want to live, she doesn't want to die either. Sharon, as played by Rogers, is an intensely combative, assertive character, and she is not willing to give in to despair and die. Instead she dreams (or wills) her first religious revelation — she sees the intense light and the pearl, which is then superimposed over her face. The image ends the first 'act' of the film, and serves as a symbolic demarcation. The first crisis/suicide attempt is answered with an extreme alternative.

Act II chronicles Sharon's respite, the peace of mind and spirit she temporarily enjoys through her discovery of Christ. The mise-en-scène communicates this sensibility through dappled sunlight and an almost pastoral visual style. The audience is given a great deal of information in a short space of time. Sharon leaves Vic behind, has found a church of fellow believers, and a child preacher who promises salvation relatively soon — in five to six years. Sharon is happier at work, breaking her routine and finding new meaning in her job by proseletizing and spreading God's word while giving directory assistance. (She explains that she was made an information operator for a reason.) Sharon chooses Randy as her life partner, and offers to save his soul as well. Six years are elliptically passed over, and we see the fruit of Sharon's act: a new family (Sharon and Randy with a little girl between them) in new surroundings (the community of the church now housed in a more opulent building set against an authentic nature setting). The problematic set up in Act I: despair, loneliness, waiting, the lack of a clear identity, is answered in Sharon's fundamentalism which provides her with rules — boundaries, guidelines, a clear set of moral principles, a reason for being, a sense of belonging to a variety of communities and unions via Jesus, the family, the community of fellow believers who will be saved. Sharon coasts along until another extreme crisis develops: the sudden loss of the husband/father, when Sharon's belief and sheltered sanctuary from the brute realities of the outside world is put to a test. Randy's death indicates that an insular group cannot be isolated from the larger social system; they are not cut off. Randy is seen firing a visibly disturbed employee. Removed from the employee's position and pain, calm in the bubble of his firm belief, Randy tries to placate the man by offering to pray, which only serves to infuriate him all the more. The employee returns to express his anger and frustration by indiscriminately killing his coworkers. When Randy confronts him, he tries to calm him by speaking to him personally calling him



In the wilderness, waiting.

'Lewis,' but quickly realizes the gap between them — he has no authority and is powerless. Sensing his danger, Randy pleads for his life by mentioning that he has a little girl. Lewis answers, "So what" and kills him.

The death is a litmus test for Sharon. She explains to a friend that while her friend's universe is a cold, empty place hers is "filled with God." Sharon's fundamentalist belief offers a tangible panacea to pain; the promise of the imminent second coming which will not only bring Jesus, but more importantly, will reunite the family.

Sharon, again, subconsciously wills a solution. She has a vision and sees Randy atop a desert mountain, gesturing to her to join him. (The film wittily places the vision in a series of 'family' snap-shots being pressed in the display window of a store.) Sharon consults the child preacher, and claims that God is calling her. She then happily prepares for the rapture, the moment of spiritual exaltation and corporeal release in the desert. Sharon's belief is absolutely tangible — she can avoid paying the mortgage ("God is building me a mansion..."), choose what she should wear, and leave without details like food or money, because she expects, and wants, the event to happen quickly. Sharon smiles as she prophetically announces that she is not coming home; on some level, conscious and/or otherwise, Sharon is expressing protest, demanding a release and change.

The final act takes place in a new setting, the desert. It is a place beyond work, leisure, beyond family and church, outside of society. (The desert is used metaphorically in a similar way in another contemporary melodrama, *Thelma and Louise*). Sharon is poignantly joined by a symbol of the future generation of women through her daughter Mary/Kimberly Cullum.¹ Mary, too, wishes to leave her disappointing life behind and is in a hurry to find heaven. Mary notes that the desert doesn't look like heaven and her mother explains that this is likely the lobby — this is where they wait until God calls. Ironically Sharon is still waiting,

Again, as in the traditions of the melodrama, the scenes are intensely emotional yet the spectator remains oddly detached. We watch their futile wait and identify with their experience of loss, indignation and restlessness; they want to change an impossible situation immediately. Mary radically articulates what Sharon feels but cannot admit. "Why can't we just die and go the quick way...Why do we have to sit here and hang around for God? C'mon, Mom, let's die." It is hard to express the poignancy of the moment and it is to the director's credit, in collaboration with his extraordinary cast, that these scenes maintain a balance of heart-rending empathy and pathos. Sharon's ultimatum — to give God one more chance — evidences a change through her

tone — she is getting angrier and more frustrated. The exchanges with the friendly sheriff's assistant, Foster Madison/Will Patton, evidence Sharon's barely suppressed defiance and foreground the absurdity of the situation. Foster's question, "Is this good for your little girl?" is a loaded one by this point. What is good for her and where will she find fulfillment? As the days and nights pass, the two become more dishevelled, hungry and less coherent. The scenes echo the earlier ones where Sharon sought to cleanse herself of dirt and satiate her spiritual hunger. Hysteria as an expression of mounting explosive tension reappears; Sharon searches for food in garbage cans and Mary suddenly sits up in the middle of her sleep and screams, "Mom, you have to make up your mind...Don't ask God to meet you half way." The line echoes the preacher child's prophecy but more importantly, demands a course of self-initiated action. Sharon relents and temporarily leaves their vigil to get them some doughnuts in town; the transgressions toward God and man begin to accumulate. They leave the site and drive off without paying for the doughnuts. Sharon submits and ravenously devours the food while Mary shows unwavering resolve. She has taken up her mother's rebellion and decides she can no longer wait for God. She has willed to "be there tonight." The sequence builds logically to the point where Sharon must grant her her wish and must kill her. She has promised Mary a salvation which is not to be found on earth and if God is slow in coming they will make the journey without his help. "It's not fair to make you pay because I'm lost...If God loves us, he'll understand." They decide to go *now* and to go together. "We'll be together forever" because, unlike disappointing earth, "nothing is broken in heaven." Sharon ensures that Mary loves God so that she will gain entry to heaven and shoots her. The moment following echoes the first suicide attempt: Sharon chooses not to live but does not or can not choose to die. Instead she shoots upward at the sky (at God

perhaps) and buries her daughter in the darkness.

In a way this is the end of act III and what follows is a subjective dénouement or epilogue. Again the setting changes and the film moves out of any semblance of realism and into a state of subjectivity, symbol and metaphor, although it has communicated in an intensely metaphoric manner throughout. The death of the child, however moral to both Sharon and Mary, is also terrible, and Sharon crosses into the subjective realm of nightmare. The theme of madness, expressed as a state of extreme protest against the logic of the norm, is common to women's fiction and is aptly suggested in the final scenes. Sharon lives out the apocalypse she has initiated, and in the spirit of fundamentalism, experiences it concretized before her. Sharon sees the horsemen and hears the trumpets, which are no longer false alarms, but appear as a test of faith. Sharon has little time to decide whether she will repent and love God or question his oppressive code and gifts of suffering. When apprehended for speeding, Sharon expresses the cracks in the logic of her belief. She could not commit suicide because then she would lose her right to enter heaven. She expresses the thought process which leads her to her final decision, her final action:

SHARON: Life is a punishment, isn't it. You have to go through with it...even if you know what it's for.

FOSTER: What is life for?

SHARON: Ask God.

FOSTER: What does he say?

SHARON: I think he says that you have to love him no matter what — but I don't love him... (she screams) not any more. He has too many rules. He told me to meet him in the desert and I did. I waited and he didn't come. He broke his promise...He let me kill my little girl and he still expects me to love him?

What Sharon learns and articulates — in contrast to her former state of blindness — is that her pain and oppression are related to a patriarchal world (and the metaphysical reflects the social) which demands love and unbending servitude at a high cost. In a figurative vision of jail, Sharon sees the woman with the tattoo of the pearl — the woman who emblemized someone like herself, and who opened up the possibility of seeking salvation. "I know you," she remarks, and proceeds to tell Sharon to "trust completely in God — he'll forgive all your sins." Amidst the fire and collapse, Sharon bravely asks, "Who forgives God?"

Caryn James, of the prestigious *New York Times* ("Zeitgeist Isn't a Snap to Capture," Sunday, October 13, 1991) uses this point as a means of illustrating the film's shallowness, but I firmly disagree. It is a bold and still relevant argument that Sharon tells her daughter, fundamental to post-war art: "He left us alone in the desert. He let me kill you. How can I love a God that let me kill my baby?" Sharon ignores the calls to repent amidst the impressive terrifying splendour of Gabriel's trumpets, the horsemen of the apocalypse and the impending judgement. She doesn't deny God, she rejects him and his system of justice. The bars of Sharon's jail cell symbolically crumble around her, but she remains seated, as she was at the start.

The final challenge and test of Sharon's faith comes when Mary enters the vision, pleading with her to obey the rules so they may be reunited. "You have to love God," to enter heaven. Foster agrees to the terms at once and disappears. Sharon instead demonstrates her commitment to herself and Mary. "I love you," she says. "That isn't enough." "Baby, it's all I have. If life is a gift — if it really is a gift and there really is a heaven...then why should I thank him for the gift of so much suffering, Mary? So much pain on the earth which he created. Let me ask him why." Mary pleads for her to proclaim her love for God without conditions and Sharon's response, which she knows will separate them, is "I can't..." "No." Sharon makes a choice and Mimi Rogers describes it correctly as a moment of triumph:

"It's a rather bleak triumph, but it's the first moment we see (her) make a decision solely based on free will. It's not her faith that becomes shaken, it's her willingness to be a part of it. In the end she's not saying she questions God's existence, she's saying "I don't want it." (Michael Szymanski, "Outrage Over The Rapture," *The Toronto Sun* Nov. 3 91).

Sharon chooses darkness, loneliness, a place outside the kingdom and beauty of heaven, and sacrifices her child for her protest — her rejection of the immoral terms of existence within a patriarchal system of belief and law. "Do you know how long you have to stay here?" Mary asks. "Yes." And as Mary disappears Sharon stands alone, backlit in a void and responds, "Forever." There is no salvation. One can only enjoy the integrity of rejecting what one cannot condone.

It is perhaps not surprising that the film evoked protests from conservative Christian groups, and that some large theatre chains considered not releasing it (Szymanski, Michael, Op. Cit.) But it is important to note that the film uses evangelical fundamentalism as a symptom and manifestation of a society which buries women alive, asking them to sit, wait, serve and unconditionally love and obey. We are back to the realm of the Gothic, where patriarchy is shaken at the foundations by the woman's unwillingness to hold up the pillars of that world. There are a few Hollywood movies released in the 90's, such as *Thelma and Louise*, *Alien III*, *The Rapture*,² which use rejection and protest as their form of closure. All of the protagonists would rather hurl themselves into a canyon, dive into molten lead or stand alone in a void than submit to a suffocating set of oppressive rules and mores. They stand as uncompromising indictments of women's experience in the 90's, using the conventions of popular Hollywood cinema.

1. *The Rapture* can be read as a bleak inversion of Rivette's *Céline and Julie Go Boating* — the attempt to change patterns is not possible and the child, metaphorically, dies.

2. *The Rapture*, of the three, is, in many ways, least accessible, and to a large extent, this is a result of the film's subjective dénouement. Realist cinema tolerates excess and subjective sequences, but there are few signposts which indicate how one is asked to read the final segments. I am not troubled by this — the visions correspond to the fundamentalist belief of concretizing the metaphysical. If it seems absurd, it is, in part, meant to. (One wonders whether some moments, like the trumpets sounding on TV and the end communicated as television static might have been omitted.)

Though it is perhaps distressingly early to be "reevaluating" a mainstream Hollywood film that appeared only within the last year, it seems to me that Alan Rudolph's *Mortal Thoughts* (1991) missed the critical attention it genuinely deserved at the time of its release. Although the film was for the most part positively received, much of the initial attention was oriented by rather superficial expectations of the genre: critics were either pleased or dissatisfied with the conventions of the mystery-thriller, and the connection between the obvious artificiality of the narrative, its "skewed" structure, and the intimate psychic dynamic at work between the two main characters, Joyce Urbanski (Glenn Headly) and Cynthia Kellogg (Demi Moore), tended to be lost.

'Everything Means Something, Cynthia'

ALAN RUDOLPH'S
MORTAL THOUGHTS

by Tom Oorman

Mortal Thoughts is explicitly and perhaps unavoidably concerned with the status of its own narration. It is, at first glance, a "reconstruction" prompted by the investigation by detectives John Woods (Harvey Keitel) and Linda Nealon (Billie Neal) into the murder of James Urbanski (Bruce Willis), apparently by his wife, Joyce. The film focuses almost exclusively on the voluntary testimony given by Joyce's closest friend, Cynthia Kellogg, and the investigation finally uncovers the surprising "truth" of the central trauma which Cynthia has repressed: that she herself killed her friend's husband, James, during an attempted rape. Though it is clear throughout that Detective Woods suspects that Cynthia is at least complicit in the murder (either



Glenn Headley and Demi Moore in *Mortal Thoughts* (1991): the inescapability of everyday burdens and compromised desires.

as a conspirator or as a participant, or both), what the detective does not suspect, of course, is that Cynthia is the sole perpetrator and that a conspiracy to cover up the murder only emerged afterwards.

Thus the structure of Cynthia's narrative must negotiate conflicting demands: it must be at once both ambiguous and credible enough to arouse the desire of the investigator, to sustain his alternative readings (chiefly, that a conspiracy preceded the killing), and it must conform, albeit retrospectively, to a "final" interpretation which can be convincingly differentiated from the privileged narration that comprises Cynthia's initial, consciously recollected version of events. Cynthia, of course, must first answer to her inquisitors with

her own plausible version of events, for in the course of the interrogation, Woods discursively constructs, through his persistent questioning and incredulous refusals, an equally plausible and incriminating version of the same events. Though Woods turns out to be "wrong" about a conscious, premeditated conspiracy, Cynthia's story is nonetheless relentlessly scrutinized by a consciousness which reads beyond the surface of commonplace events and motivations and thus provides a sceptical paradigm for the viewer's relation to the narrative. Woods, for instance, tracks the game of linguistic play and intention in which Joyce and Cynthia are initially engaged. Yet though he at first clumsily assumes this game to proof of a premeditated conspiracy,

he begins to recognize in it the more complex interplay of desire and identification with which the film is chiefly concerned.

Joyce continually "threatens" that she will one day kill her abusive husband. To Cynthia, and perhaps also to Joyce, this is clearly "just talk," part perhaps of a generalized, public appeal (for recognition, for protection) as well as an attempt to disperse the tension brought on by unrelieved oppression. Yet the game also registers privately, as part of an intimate discourse between the two women: in one of the film's most compelling and seductive scenes, Joyce, all the while smiling at Cynthia (and, incidentally, planning their night out together), nonchalantly mixes rat poison into her husband's sugar. Significantly, it is at this point in Cynthia's account that Woods first recognizes the unconscious identification Cynthia makes with Joyce. In an effort to dispel the notion of conspiracy, Cynthia claims that they could have killed James at this point had they actually wished or planned to do so. In answer, Woods nonetheless insists that Cynthia has already unconsciously implied as much, and the investigation reorients itself at an entirely different level of intentionality: "You said, 'We could have got rid of him.'"

Cynthia has come forward ostensibly to give evidence against Joyce in the murder of her husband James, yet it is only much later in the film that we learn that Cynthia's more immediate motive for testifying is that Joyce has subsequently murdered her husband, Arthur Kellogg (John Pankow). Thus both the circumstances of Urbanski's death, and the very fact of Kellogg's murder, have been purposely withheld from Cynthia's narration; in fact, Joyce seems to have initiated the narrative as we first have it by a single, desperate act of self-defense.

Though Cynthia's later recognition radically disorients the received narrative, it is still clearly Joyce who has "killed" her husband. On this point the film is unambiguously, or rather, to a retrospective reading of the film, is not sufficiently ambiguous. Yet it is essential that this not merely be construed as a narrative fault, the result of carelessness or infidelity to some realist premise: Joyce has in some way stepped into Cynthia's consciousness and, by thus filling in the apparent gap in her memory, has purposely occupied the space of Cynthia's guilt (it is only briefly, in the reconstructed carnival sequence which precedes the real version of Urbanski's murder, that the physical positions of the two women have been precisely inverted). Joyce thus seems to stand in for Cynthia willingly, as an act of conscious identification, out of gratitude and love, yet this is also the only means left of satisfactorily fulfilling her own very conscious and widely-advertised desire to kill James. Since Cynthia has acted as her unconscious agent, and indeed remains unconscious in this respect for most of the film, Joyce is able to co-opt and transform Cynthia's sudden, unpremeditated act to her own purposes.

The "favour" is reciprocated, of course, and though the process of identification thus proves in some odd way to have been "mutual," it succeeds only as the end result of a complex chain of circumstances which brings about a progressive and fatal estrangement. The relationship between the two women is in the end fraught with ambivalence, yet

Cynthia's dramatic recognition at the close of the film is, of necessity, simultaneously the recognition of her own desire to have had Arthur killed. The construction must be passive in this instance because Cynthia's desire can only in the end be enacted *through* Joyce as the fulfillment of Cynthia's identification with her. As Woods points out, Cynthia does everything in her power to ensure that Joyce *will* kill Arthur: Cynthia, in fact, not only provokes Joyce with the emotional and practical motivations for murdering Arthur, but supplies as well the physical means and opportunity for her doing so. The final purpose of these unconscious arrangements is to ensure not only that Joyce will enact Cynthia's desire, but that *Joyce* will enact Cynthia's desire.

THOUGH DETECTIVE WOODS is himself sympathetic, it is clear that Cynthia is the intended victim of an interpretive enclosure: as the detective tells her, "Everything means something." Despite the genuine empathy which Woods brings to bear, despite the sensitivity which so clearly augments his investigative powers, it is clear that the law will make no real distinction between either conscious premeditation or unconscious desire as motive. Woods' voyeuristic, interpretive desire, his will to truth, is clearly driven by his own fear of female conspiracy. It is by virtue of this fear, in fact, that he is so sensitively and accurately attuned to the nuances of the relationship between the two women. The investigation itself is thus simultaneously both an expression and an accommodation of the detective's desire; Cynthia recognizes, for instance, that the conspiracy hypothesis is in fact but an expression, as she tells Woods, of "what you *want*."

At the immediate level of policing, the nature of femininity itself is clearly the object of intense concern. Detective Nealon, the female detective, takes no real part in the investigation. Continually deferring to the direction taken by Woods, her presence, in fact, serves only to further emphasize the inherently engendered nature of the interrogation. The purpose of the investigation is, after all, to identify, evaluate, and isolate the particularities of feminine complicity: to identify its source and status; to evaluate its nature, its strength, and its chances of success; and to isolate and destabilize it at any cost. It is only here, in fact, that disinterested analysis can be clearly differentiated from the motivations which inspire the detective's imaginative insights, insights which, in the larger interest of disciplinary correction, will ultimately connect desire and identification to a particular statutory transgression. Not only does everything mean something, meaning itself is inseparable from political effects, from the purposes, intentions, and interests of those who control both the interpretation of evidence and the production and dissemination of meaning.

Yet even though the investigation is inexorably drawn towards, and simultaneously frustrated by, the mysterious connection between the two women, at the end of the film the exact status of the relationship has not been satisfactorily elucidated, nor indeed have the particulars of the "conspiracy," of the story itself, been fully disclosed. Thus, an essential anxiety persists, and indeed seems to strengthen the detective's resolution to uncover the final, palpable

truth promised by Cynthia's return to the interrogation room. It is this return itself that implies both recognition and resolution, yet it is a recognition perhaps more subtle than at first appears, for it seems to verge upon a recognition not only of repressed desire, but also of the mechanism of identification which has, at least in part, answered to unconscious demands.

THOUGH IT IS perhaps only by virtue of coincidence, it seems *Mortal Thoughts* will inevitably be compared to and contrasted with Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991).¹ Yet though the two films were released at roughly the same time and, indeed, share some common themes, they are in the end stylistic antitheses. Both films are remarkable for reasons that go beyond the mere rarity of their concerns or the obvious designs they have upon their audience. Nonetheless, it is perhaps best to forego a detailed critical comparison, if only to avoid the bourgeois critical trap that, by inevitably seeming to prefer one film over the other, would effect the ultimate and specific end of dividing their combined discursive effect.

Suffice to say that as an artistic effort, *Thelma and Louise* occupies the realm of a phantasy whose fulfillment is ineffably caught up in the sublimity of the final *Liebestod*. The difference, in fact, that ultimately obtains between these two films is merely the difference between romantic and realist tragedy. Though romantic tragedy may seem palpably to transform the inevitable, it is a transformation that really only accentuates tragic resolution. *Mortal Thoughts*, on the contrary, refuses to avail itself even of the narrative reconciliation and affirmation which seems to lie within its grasp. This is, I suspect, the final result of the film's stubborn fidelity to the lived experience of many women: to the social, economic, and ideological conditions of their lives. These are, indeed, the factors that most decidedly influence the film, that determine its direction, its resolution, and that organize its narrative and stylistic effects.

For instance, it is part of an ideological determination that Cynthia should remain unconscious of her own desires, that the content of her phantasies should be delivered only belatedly, and that they should remain essentially alienated from her, beyond her control. Despite the force and efficacy the film seems to claim for Cynthia's final recognition, her desires are never adequately delivered to consciousness, nor are they even transmuted by a reality principle which might negotiate sexual fulfillment. This is the same sort of ideological determination that estranges the two women at the end of the film: there is clearly an analogy to be drawn here, for it seems inevitable, even part of the hasty return to the "natural" order of things which attends the narrative's dis/closure, that women be isolated not only from each other, but also from themselves.

It is in a more particular and satisfying manner, however, that the film maintains its contact with the material conditions of women's lives: these conditions are never ignored or elided in the interest of mere narrative exposition. Children must be fed and cared for, and the family business taken care of, even despite the extra pressure of murdering an abusive husband, disposing of evidence, or concocting

alibis. Rudolph seems to have an unerring eye for the organized chaos of domestic life, and his refusal to ignore the exasperating minutiae of either domestic labour or family interaction is indicative of the respect he demands for his characters. At one point Cynthia must hastily clean the van and burn its blood-soaked carpet while at the same time mind a teething infant. Such images are crowded together, juxtaposed as a matter of inescapable fact rather than as ironic or moral commentary.

The sense of claustrophobia reaches its peak at James' funeral, where the Urbanskis' obvious suspicions about Joyce are virtually indistinguishable from the banal and petty intrigue of in-laws jockeying for a more conspicuous position around the coffin. This is, of course, an extreme example of the point at which the burden of the everyday intersects with the extraordinary circumstances of the narrative. Yet for Cynthia and Joyce the growing awareness of the inherently onerous conditions under which they live is in fact the exact opposite of the disencumbering that initially defines the narrative space of *Thelma and Louise*. Cynthia and Joyce must cope with the denser fabric of an inescapable oppression, with the burden of myriad domestic particularities, and as well, with the exhaustive and relentless interrogation of their private selves that begins with their husbands, friends, relatives, and in-laws, and that only in the end is officially taken up by the police.

In the final analysis, children, familiar responsibility, marital loyalty, in fact the entire clutter of domestic pieties becomes merely part of the ideological background noise. For the women themselves, these only stand in as ready signifiers for the pathetically compromised freedoms to which they so desperately cling: "You've gotta do something," Joyce begs Cynthia, "or we're gonna kiss our kids goodbye." Even the murder of James is anything but empowering, for at the very moment of transgression and deliverance they are ominously stalked and threatened by a carload of drunken men. The women, however, are inured to the situation, to the abuse and humiliation, and the incident only has significance to them as a potential means of betraying their crime.

In Rudolph's film, except for what might be provided by fleeting moments of identification or incomplete instances of recognition, there is no "outside" of the specific social and material conditions in which Cynthia and Joyce find themselves. Yet if they do in the end seem to refuse to be reconciled to such conditions, they are forced to recognize that even their most intimate and unconscious desires entail the direst of consequences. The film is the complement of Scott's *Thelma and Louise*; if the latter is of itself a desideratum, disclosing how marginalized individuals may be empowered by enacting their desire through identification, *Mortal Thoughts* is a critical reminder of just how thoroughly desire and identification, even in what seem their most positive and liberating forms, come to be qualified, temporized, or otherwise inflected by the real.

1. See Kathleen Murphy, "Only Angels Have Wings," *Film Comment* 27.4 (July-August, 1991): 26-29.

"Well... That's a Start!"

OR
WHAT HOLLYWOOD CAN DO
WITH A
DEEPLY SERIOUS COMEDY

by Cosimo Urbano

"This was my body." With these most unusual words begins one of the most unusual films of the recent past: Barbet Schroeder's *Reversal Of Fortune*. The fact that the film has enjoyed both popular and critical success makes its unusualness all the more interesting for critical analysis, since one is faced once again with the "discovery" that Hollywood's purported paradigm of transparency and narrative realism seems to be perceived as such mainly by critics and historians, rather than by the general public. If, in other words, a mass audience can follow *and* enjoy a film narrated all along by a well-known actress, Glenn Close, playing a well-known real woman, Sunny von Bulow, who is, both in actual reality and in the fictional reality of the film, vegetating in a deep coma in a New York hospital, then, maybe, our scholarly assumptions about what audiences expect and want from Hollywood (i.e., transparent narrative realism) are still much shakier than we would like them to be.

I shall immediately point out that the issue of the film's relationship with reality, i.e., with the actual events and trials constituting the von Bulow case in the early 1980s, is not what is at stake here. One can safely accept the suggestion that part of the film's appeal, above all to American audiences, was indeed due to the notoriousness of the case, yet this alone could not account for its success abroad nor, more importantly, for the fact that the film has been success-

ful despite its being constructed in a highly unconventional way. It is just this unconventionality, that is, the film's extremely complex interweaving of visual flashbacks, voice-over narrations, traditional dramatic scenes and what I'll refer to as the "hospital scenes," in which the (un)dead character played by Close talks directly to the audience in an ironically detached tone, that interests us here. The contemporary audience's knowledge that Sunny von Bulow is a real woman in a real coma in New York City might play a part in their reactions to the film, but the fact remains that the film's extremely original structure and some of its narrational devices are not dependent upon this knowledge. A French spectator will not be unable to follow the film if s/he does not know that Sunny really exists.

Let us, therefore, try to repress — or rather, disregard — our knowledge of the events which the film is based on (even if we know that we can never be completely successful at this, given that we are in fact the film's contemporary audience) and let's try to examine how the film works as a Hollywood film offered to a popular audience.

After the credits have appeared over a long helicopter tracking shot of an endless series of Newport mansions, a steadicam floats its way into Sunny von Bulow's hospital room. It pauses a moment to show her on her bed, focuses on the life-sustaining devices, and then gently pulls back to show all of her body again. At this point Close utters: "This





Reversal of Fortune

was my body." Immediately there is a cut to her Newport bedroom. It's a shot of an empty bed. Slowly, through superimposition, Sunny and Claus von Bulow appear on the same bed, and Sunny's voice starts reciting: "On December 19th, 1979..."

According to narrative theory what we have here is a character who turns, to use Genette's terms,¹ into an intradiegetic narrator, opening up an analepsis within the text's first narrative. The spectator is led back in time to some events happening before the moment in which the intradiegetic narrator begins his or her recounting. A classic example of this temporal structuring in cinema occurs in *Double Indemnity* where the principal character, Walter Neff, literally records his story into a Dictaphone. From a shot of him talking into the microphone we cut to a precedent moment in time, the beginning of his adventure, and we then follow this adventure all the way back to that point at which he had started telling it.

If the transitions are clear enough the reader/viewer has no problems in following a text made up of even a great number of stories-within-stories, as it is exemplified by one of the prototypes of Western narrative tradition: the *Odyssey*. Like Ulysses, Sunny is here telling something that happened in the past. Later on in the film, it will be Claus who will tell his versions of the events, and then both Alan Dershowitz and one of his assistants will initiate what we

might call hypothetical analapses, that is the narrator's suppositions about what might have happened one specific night.

In each of these cases the viewer is always able to understand whose recounting it is that s/he is watching because: 1) the starting moment of each flashback is clearly positioned as originating from one character, who says: "this is what happened then..." and 2) most often, during the flashbacks the narrator's voice-over is heard, describing or commenting on the events being shown.

This leads us to an extremely important point about an ontological difference between cinematic and literary narration, which forces us to modify our narratological tools when dealing with film. As David Alan Black points out, a flashback in cinema is not simply constituted by verbal sentences, but is a series of sound images. That is "(t)he enacted sequence...is of course not literally the result of the verbal narration. Indeed, it appears to be presented directly by the same primary authorial agency which constructed the narrating character in the first place. The problematic resides within this enacted sequence itself, in the innate tension between a story which is ostensibly — diegetically — attributed to a talking human narrator, and a discourse which is manifestly not consubstantial with any verbal narration, taped in its entirety or implied."²

The implication of this "innate tension" is that in cinema a visual flashback always entails an ambiguity, a certain confusion of narrating voices. Black introduces the terms "invoking" narrator and "intrinsic" narrator to describe respectively the intradiegetic character who appears to be the source of the flashback, and that agency which is the source of the text itself. "Narrative films are narrated in the first instance by an *intrinsic narrator*, which alone occupies the extradiegetic narrative level and whose narrative agency is congruent with the discursive activity of the medium itself."³

This intrinsic narrator is a "structural condition"³ because "the role of extradiegetic narrator in this particular medium (the cinema) belongs to the medium itself."³ The narrating instance of a first narrative (Genette's extradiegetic narrator) can never be a character in the cinema. Black is far from offering a tautological definition when he states: "the very fact of narratedness becomes synonymous with narrative agency."³ What he is saying is that whereas Robinson Crusoe, the character, is the extradiegetic narrator of Defoe's novel, no filmed version of that novel can ever be narrated by an entity named Crusoe.

1. See: Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay In Method*. Trans. Jane E. Levine (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), chapter 1.

2. David Alan Black, "Genette and Film: Narrative Level in the Fiction Cinema," in *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, no. 3/4 (1986) p. 20.

3. Black, p. 22.



Claus von Bulow with Alan Dershowitz (Ron Silver).

What does exactly happen then during a cinematic enacted analepsis, or, to put it more simply, a visual flashback? Black suggests that "a process of transference of narrational status from invoking narrator to intrinsic narrator..."³ occurs. Drawing again from Genette, he identifies this process with Genette's *pseudodiegesis*, that is, a figure which "...consists of telling as if it were diegetic (as if it were at the same narrative level as its context) something that has nevertheless been presented as (or can easily be guessed to be) metadiegetic in its principle or if one prefers in its origin..."⁴ The effect, as Black indicates, is that: "(t)he story-within-the-story...becomes the story. One generation of quotation marks is excised; everything beyond it shifts by one level."⁵

Before returning to *Reversal Of Fortune* let us review some of Black's conclusions: "(p)art of the value of the term pseudodiegesis is its compound nature, which recognizes the appropriation of the passage by the intrinsic narrator, while allowing that the abdication of the invoking narrator remain equivocal. This non-commitment is particularly precious in

film: the possibility of the voice-overs lingering or returning during the enacted flashback makes available a continuum of nuance and strategy, whereby invoking narrator may cede or retain more or less narrational presence and therefore significance."⁵

The point thus is that a balance is maintained, the process of transference of narrational status is never complete, the invoked narrator always keeps some degree of power over the images, or rather informs them somehow, in a more or less noticeable way. That this is always the case with invoked passages in Hollywood cinema is made all too clear in *Reversal Of Fortune*. As I've said it is always possible to know with certainty which character is invoking a particular flashback. Not only because his or her voice often returns at the end of the flashback, or even during it, but also because the very images carry slight differences. For example, it is one of the functions of Irons's talent that his Claus talks, moves, and acts differently according to whose flashback he is pictured in (his, Sunny's, Alan's, or Alan's

assistant), while retaining a sense of identity throughout the film.

What is most important to realize regarding *Reversal Of Fortune*, however, is that of all its invoking narrators, Sunny clearly occupies a privileged role. To fully understand this point let us examine her character in detail. She's presented all along as living in a limbo. She is vegetating in a coma, yet she addresses us (the spectators) directly. That is, because of her condition of existence, she is an intradiegetic invoking narrator, but, unlike Walter in *Double Indemnity* and unlike all the other invoking narrators in *Reversal Of Fortune*, she does not address (because, in fact, she cannot) other intradiegetic characters. It's been remarked that the model here is William Holden's character in *Sunset Boulevard*, a dead character telling his own story. Yet the differences in this case far outweigh the similarities. Not only is Sunny not totally dead, but, most importantly, her suspended status is foregrounded. It is in fact the starting point of the film. When one thinks of *Sunset Boulevard*, one thinks of a film "deceiving" its audience. The whole voice-over narration turns out to be a "trick." And this is because it is only at the end that the narrator's identity with the dead body in the pool is revealed. The spectators had not been told all along that they were listening to a dead man.

Clearly this is not the case in *Reversal Of Fortune*. From the very first words we are told that she is in an irreversible coma. Moreover, we are constantly reminded of this in many ways. First of all, her voice's ironic detachment gives it an other-worldly quality. Secondly, the very things she says suggest she has achieved some kind of superior (self) knowledge. She makes philosophical remarks about the nature of time, the sense of being a human being, and even, not least importantly, the American people's attitude toward truth and the legal process. After a while, it becomes quite clear that the meta-diegetic Sunny (the living Sunny we see in the analepses) is a very different Sunny from the intradiegetic invoking "entity" that opens the film.

Schroeder himself has pointed out⁴ how he used the steadicam's floating quality to suggest that the soul of Sunny is moving around the room whenever she's narrating. I would argue that this is exactly the effect that is achieved, and that it combines with the strongly unrealistic bluish light and the eerie sounds of the life-sustaining devices to give the hospital scenes their suspended, out-of-this-world quality.

That we are never allowed to forget Sunny's status is not in itself as important or interesting however as the fact that Sunny invokes not only events of her lifetime, but the entire reversal process as well. She opens the film by telling us what had happened up to 1983, and then she says: "You are about to see how Clause von Bulow sought to reverse, or escape from, that jury's verdict. You tell me." It is at this point that one has the distinct feeling that the film "begins." That is to say, the film's first (intra)diegetic level seems to be the story, happening in 1983, of Alan Dershowitz's successful attempt to reverse Claus's conviction. But, of course, this is not the case. The entire legal process is but a metadiegesis invoked by the vegetating Sunny. It is, in fact, a pseudodiegesis, and the fact that one strongly "feels" that it consti-

tutes the film's first diegetic level is explained by that very process of transference of narrational status from invoking to intrinsic narrator that, as we've seen, Black defines as the principal characteristic of pseudodiegesis.

It would therefore seem that what we have here is but a classic example of pseudodiegesis: a film in which a metadiegetic narrative passes itself off as the first diegetic one. Sunny sets the film on and then we somehow forget that what we are watching is invoked by her. However I want to argue that this is in fact *not* what happens in *Reversal Of Fortune*. The process at work here can and must be discussed in the terms outlined above, but what must also be accounted for is the uniquely distinct effect that the pseudodiegetic transference produces in this film. I shall state that in *Reversal Of Fortune* there occurs, to a degree never encountered by me in Hollywood cinema, a collapse of the invoking narrator onto the intrinsic one, so that it can be argued that here is a film whose extradiegetic narrator is a character, and that this character is Sunny von Bulow's soul.

Two observations must be made here. First of all, to say that a soul is a character should not be taken as a non-sense in this context, since what this statement wants to suggest is that in *Reversal Of Fortune* the intrinsic (extradiegetic) narrator is not a structural condition, but an identifiable human character. But, since this character is the comatose Sunny von Bulow, we grant the status of narrator to her soul.

Secondly, I recognize that I could never hope to hold my ground were I to fight a theoretical battle in narratological terms on this issue. It is simply impossible, in a theoretical framework, to argue successfully what I am suggesting. Let me therefore immediately revise my statement as such: *Reversal Of Fortune* is a film whose extradiegetic narrator is felt to be throughout an identifiable character. As I've already said we are dealing here with classic pseudodiegesis, yet given the film's unusualness the effect produced by this figure is quite unique. Which is to say that the usual ambiguity derived from the overlapping narrational voices in pseudodiegesis takes here a sharp turn not so much in the direction of the invoking narrator disappearing behind the intrinsic, but in the direction of the invoking narrator becoming the ultimate origin of the text, its extradiegetic narrator.

A look back at *Reversal Of Fortune* should make this point clear. That Sunny is "controlling" the entire narrative is illustrated not only by her statements introducing and sealing off the film ("you tell me" and "when you get where I am, you'll know the rest"), but also, most powerfully, by her direct intervention within the narrative of the reversal process. After invoking a metadiegetic flashback dating back to her first encounter with Claus in 1964, Sunny's soul (that is, the combination of steadicam's movements and her other-worldly voice) takes us to her New York bedroom where Claus is sleeping with his mistress, and then outside Dershowitz's house in Harvard. What this transition, together with a later one which will lead into the appeal

4. Genette, p. 236.

5. Black, p. 23.

6. In an interview with Robert Sklar published in *Cineaste*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1991), p. 6.

hearings, suggests is that in this film Sunny can at any moment enter the text as an all-powerful commentator. Which is to say that, for all intents and purposes, she and the text (as narrating agency) are one and the same. There is not a single shot of the film which could not be introduced to us via Sunny's voice-over. Moreover of the seven hospital scenes in the film, the first three and the last one can be seen as the introduction and the ending of the text. But the position of the fourth, fifth, and sixth seems to be motivated by no other logic than that set up by the intrinsic narrator itself. Far from being part of any hermeneutic or proairetic chains, these scenes are equivalent to those moments of the traditional novel in which the omniscient extradiegetic narrator pauses to make some reflections or comments about what's happened so far in the story, human nature, or maybe even the nature of story-telling itself.

Being "her" scenes, the hospital scenes in other words trespass with her into the extradiegetic level, and therefore become the "very fact of narratedness" itself. Like *Anna Karenina's* famous beginning ("All happy families are alike..."), whenever Sunny's body is on the screen and/or her voice is heard, what we have is nothing but the narrating act itself.

That this can happen is a consequence of the fact that the film allows a "soul" to speak to its spectators. And a soul caught in a limbo beyond the time of the narrated events, but at the same time able to lead us into those events from an endless number of entrance points, might very well be Hollywood cinema's only way to attribute the extradiegetic narrational position to a proper name. Again, I am the first to admit that the hospital scenes in *Reversal Of Fortune* are, from a strictly theoretical point of view, intradiegetic. But, even if we can't deny that a narrating agency is showing us some diegetic events in these scenes (for example, the nurses cleaning Sunny's body), nevertheless at the same time we can't escape the strong feeling that this agency is still the vegetating Sunny von Bulow. In literature we can accept a character being the extradiegetic narrator because the medium used (language) is exactly the same for both extra an intradiegetic characters. A cinematographic image, however, cannot ever be attributed totally to a character as language can. However we seem to grant souls quite different powers from those we grant mortals. And if I say that a soul knows the past, the present, and the future; that it can go back and forth in time at will; and that, under certain conditions (dreams, hallucinations, etc.), it can address living human beings (all powers that belong to souls according to our conceptualization of the idea of the soul), am I not also enumerating some of classical Hollywood cinema's historical characteristics?

Let us, then, say that Sunny von Bulow's soul is *Reversal Of Fortune's* extradiegetic narrator. What does this entail? First of all, it entails granting her the power not only of structuring the narrative at will, but also of making comments and/or judgments about narrative characters and events which, given her thorough powers (that is, narrational powers), cannot but be experienced by the spectator as ultimate. That is to say, once we come to the end of the film's hermeneutic chain, we are not left alone to make our

decisions, but we are clearly told "this is all you can know." Given that this utterance comes from the film's first narrating agency itself, we are literally bound to accept it as true. The film tells us that it will not reveal the "truth." We cannot know what really happened.

In fact, this has been a film about ambiguity all along. The prime example is of course Claus von Bulow himself. Always professing his innocence, he nevertheless acts throughout the movie in a most ambiguous way. Down to the very last joke which concludes the film, he seems compelled to instill in both the other characters' and the spectators' minds doubts about his innocence and/or his ethics. Even more than Claus, however, it is the film's narrative itself, or rather the narrative of the reversal attempt, which raises more doubts than it dispels. Dershowitz clearly goes from believing Claus "did it," to believing in his innocence. Yet he never explains *why* he changed his mind. All that can be deduced is that at some point he somehow "felt" Claus to be innocent. This feeling, however, is never proved right. In fact, as the film all too clearly reminds us, it *can't* be proved either right or wrong.

Moreover, despite his previous statements about Claus's innocence, at the end of the film Dershowitz seems once again to despise him ("Morally, you are on your own"), while taking pride only from the "very important" legal victory. Probably, the point here is that underneath its appearance, the film is *not* about the successful reversal. As Robert Sklar suggests, all the efforts and even the ultimate triumph of Dershowitz's "...dedicated defense team, ring a little hollow."⁷ And it could not have been otherwise, I would argue, given the film's utter determination to undermine the very possibility of ever arriving at the truth.

At this point one could suggest that, if the film is not about the "truth" of the case, it is about the repair of an injustice. It is, in other words, about the legal system's ability not to know exactly what happened, but to dispense justice. One unequivocal truth of this case, the film would seem to be saying, is that Claus had been framed. Hence there is no ambiguity in the celebration of the legal victory: a wrong has been repaired. Unfortunately this is not where the film stops. By leaving very open the possibility of Claus's guilt (the suggestion is made that the kids could have framed a guilty man; Alan's "you're on your own"; Sunny's "Is he the devil?"), the film's ambiguity shifts to the ethical plane. From the viewpoint of "pure" justice, to free a guilty man is just as wrong as to frame an innocent.

The very fact that Dershowitz decides to go with Claus's innocence and not on a technicality undermines the idea that this is a film about the denunciation and repair of a wrong. The idealist lawyer does not want to prove that Claus had been framed (i.e., that a wrong has been committed), but that he is innocent (i.e., that his conviction was a mistake). In fact, Dershowitz is caught all along in the web of the film's ambiguity, and his changes of mind parallel quite closely the spectator's. Because of the way the film is constructed, we too are slowly led to doubt Claus's guilt, only to be left wondering about it again at the end.

To suggest that this courtroom drama is neither about truth nor justice is to grant, once more, its extradiegetic nar-

rator the last word. In what is truly the film's most magnificent moment, Sunny's soul literally deconstructs the film for us. Given the unquotability of the filmic text, I must urge the reader to refer to this segment directly. I am talking about the point, toward the end of the film, where a brief hospital scene introduces the beginning of the appeal hearings. No description in words can come close to reproducing the effect that the combination of the voice-over with the editing achieves here. What can be done, however, is argue that here Sunny denounces the ultimate "silliness" of the legal process. Following a reflection about the inexorable unidirectionality of time, she suggests that all the legal efforts to "determine precisely what happened" are bound to be nothing but a waste of time, money, and effort. As we hear her reflections, we are shown alternatively the beginning of the hearings (happening in 1983) and her empty Newport bedroom as it is "now." This "now" is of course the time at which Sunny is speaking to us, which is to say, the extradiegetic eternal time of the narrating act itself.

What is truly fascinating, then, is that at the very same moment in which we are reminded of the irreversibility of time, we are also reminded that narrative cinema is, *just like the legal process*, most often engaged in highly complex structuring of narrative levels, that is, in manipulations of time. The fact that *Reversal Of Fortune's* narrative structure resembles that of a trial could be taken as another proof that

the film is indeed self-consciously making this point. One could, in fact, regard the film's many flashbacks as comparable to the different witnesses' testimonies in a trial. Sunny's introduction (the film's first 10 minutes) brings to mind the prosecution's opening statements, Sunny's "You're about to see..." resembling the D.A.'s "We're going to prove..." Of course one always expects a courtroom drama to resemble, by depicting it, a trial. Yet the point here is that *Reversal Of Fortune* is not set in the courtroom, but is instead *formally* similar to a trial's structure, with its opening statements (Sunny's introduction), the following series of testimonies which are used to "get back at the truth" through re-enactments of the past (the film's many flashbacks), and the final verdict (the film's conclusion). And, given the film's desire to denounce the "silliness" of believing the legal process to be objective, scientific and fair, it is only coherent that the particular case depicted here should be so utterly ambiguous, and that, unlike in a real trial, as Sklar points, no guilt or innocence is ultimately declared.⁷

One could argue from here that, by making us aware of the similarities between a fiction film and a trial, while at the same time criticizing the trial's ultimate value, *Reversal Of Fortune* is also self-reflexively criticizing its own belong-

7. Robert Sklar, "Saint Alan and the Prince of Perversion," in *Cineaste*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1991), p. 11.

Sunny (Glenn Close) and Claus (Jeremy Irons).



ing in the realist tradition, that is, in that tradition of filmmaking aimed at the "real" and the "truth." I would not know how far to push this idea, yet undoubtedly the Dershowitz character does seem, for example, to mirror in many ways the spectator's position. I have already noted how his changes of mind in regard to Claus parallel ours. Even more significant than this, however, is the fact that, about midway through the film, there occurs a brief, yet very powerful moment which I would not hesitate to call clearly self-reflexive. Claus is in Harvard, telling Dershowitz and his team about those Christmas days leading to Sunny's two comas, when, at the end of a quite poignant flashback, there is a cut to Dershowitz, looking *exactly like* each spectator looks at that moment: puzzled, confused, and slightly embarrassed at having been allowed to enter the von Bulows' troubled personal lives so deeply.

That Dershowitz's role is primarily that of a spectator should not surprise those who are agreeing with my reading of the film. Far from being the traditional hero of a traditional courtroom drama, the idealist and very smart lawyer of *Reversal Of Fortune* is little more than a representative (literally and metaphorically) of that same legal process the film defines as "silly." It is true that Dershowitz is the main actant, the apparent hero of the narrative, but the point is that this is far from being a traditional narrative film. And here one should keep in mind how one of Claus's sick jokes gives more pleasure than any of Dershowitz's legal wizardry, or how Claus's aristocratic behavior is more attractive than Dershowitz's extraordinary righteousness.

Quite clearly the film plays Claus and Alan off each other, drawing a lot out of this clash. In a sense then we could say that the film has no hero. Neither Claus nor Alan is at its center, but it is instead their very relationship that constitutes the film's focus. However, there is no denying that Claus's appeal far surpasses Alan's. One could think of a number of reasons for this: his part is the better written one, or Irons is the better actor (did he not, after all, win the Oscar for this role?). Digging a little deeper, one could also draw parallels with other works in which an evil character "steals" the attention away from the hero(es) of the narrative by displaying an irresistible mix of self-conscious fiendishness, superior intelligence, and charming humor (Dr. Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lecter would be the privileged example here, but one could also think of De Niro's character in *Cape Fear*).

Most likely all these components play a part here, contributing to make Claus, from his very first appearance, the film's most interesting character. Yet I believe that Claus's appeal ultimately derives from two aspects of the film that we must now bring ourselves to consider: its being a comedy, and its treatment of class.

The fact that *Reversal Of Fortune* is a black comedy, "...perhaps the most potent screen satire of the upper class since *Citizen Kane*,"⁸ has been pointed out by most of its commentators. The significance of this has, however, been overlooked. Nothing in the material, that is in the von Bulow case itself, predestined the film to be a comedy. In fact, quite the opposite is true. This could have been perfect prime time TV stuff, a network *drama* of the week. Instead,

it turned out to be one of the funniest, most enjoyable films of these years. Why has this happened?

Let's make some reflections about the comedy in it. It would be a grave mistake to believe that the film is funny only when Claus is on the screen. A certain ironic tone is present all along even in Sunny's introductory remarks. Subsequently, each time she speaks her way into the text, her words act as a distancing filter through which we can look into the von Bulows' beautiful, extravagant world, and laugh at it. However, it would be just as mistaken to believe *Reversal Of Fortune* to be a comedy throughout. Dershowitz and his team are depicted in such a traditional, psychologically realist way that, with the obvious exception of those moments in which Claus is with them, the legal team's scenes have nothing funny about them.

The comedy is thus related to the class issue, and what can be deduced from this is that the film's already-mentioned playing of Claus and Alan off each other is in fact part of a wider strategy, whereby *Reversal Of Fortune* sets up an opposition between Alan's world (the world of the legal process, ethical judgments, righteousness, action, etc.) and Claus's (the world of humongous wealth). The first, against all audience expectations, rings hollow and is associated with "a lot of silliness." The second makes us laugh.

The nature and effects of this laughing are however quite complex. After many of Claus's jokes the spectator is left giggling, but with a bitter aftertaste, and again we are led back to consider how similar Alan's relationship with Claus is to our own: a mix of repulsion and fascination. Moreover, in its treatment of the von Bulows in *general* the film is as ambiguous as in its dealing with the "truth" of the case. I personally find some of the Christmas scenes in the Newport mansion extremely hard to watch, *even if* — and in fact most likely *because* — I feel that I could be led to laugh at any time. I am talking of course about all those moments in which Sunny's children are present, and that I can't but refer to as extremely poignant, as the children are pictured as utterly powerless to understand, let alone control, the sickness surrounding them. The film quite clearly makes fun of the wealthy and of their privileges, but at the same time refuses ever to vilify them.

It is very unusual for an American film to take a complex, multi-layered attitude toward wealth. Screwball comedies would use industrial magnates and their perky daughters as stock characters, as psychologically developed as masks in the Italian *commedia dell'Arte*. More recent films have shamelessly adopted a resentful populist attitude, so that the Wall Street stock-broker has all too simplistically become the scapegoat for society's sins (*Wall Street*, *Blue Steel*, *Sleeping With the Enemy*). With the possible exception of some 1950s' and 1960s' melodramas based on Tennessee Williams's plays, the degree to which America's self-proclaimed classless society is in fact quite rigidly structured around economic lines has been largely unexplored by Hollywood.

Not by *Reversal Of Fortune* though. One of the most striking — and funniest — moments in the film occurs during the flashback (evoked by Claus) in which Sunny hides her drugs in Claus's travel bag to prevent her maid from taking

them away again. Sensing her mother behind the maid's efforts, Sunny says "Well, just because she had all the money before I had all the money, does not mean she is my lord and master." To which Claus promptly replies "Of course not. I am your lord and master." Sunny's reaction shot and her glance to Claus after this statement are absolutely indescribable in words. And so is the detached and deadpan self-deprecating way in which Claus adds, without even waiting for her response, "Just kidding!"

In a brief, exhilarating moment the film is able to suggest two things. First, Sunny's self-abusive behavior is clearly linked to her enormous wealth. What is interesting here is that a more conventional film would have a rather focused on her *kids* being destroyed by privilege — the implication of course being that wealth can be dangerous only to an unformed character. An adult with a fully developed personality would have no problems in a Hollywood film dealing with his or her being worth a few hundred million dollars — a belief that is, of course, at the very base of the moral justification for allowing unrestrained accumulation of personal wealth in Western society.

Second, the film is here pointing out the degree to which wealth is in fact the ultimate ideological determinant. No matter how much "saner," more balanced, or less out of touch with a reality a husband might be in this purportedly patriarchal society, if his wife is worth over 10 million dollars more than he is, there is really no question as to who is the lord and master of their house.

I have been trying to suggest all through this essay that Sunny von Bulow's soul is also the lord and master of this film. And that I quite like her for this, since here is a film determined to show what very rarely gets shown (as opposed to being "represented") on our screens: humongous wealth. I know of nobody who has seen the film and who has not been amazed to the point of disbelief by the never-ending series of Newport "cottages" which opens it. The amazement comes from the realization that they are really there, they exist. We might have known this all along, but somehow *seeing* them produces a whole different acknowledgement of it.

We must at this point go back to the issue of the film being a comedy, and try to understand why only the scenes with the wealthy make us laugh. One could suggest that here the use of comedy is a way to somehow mitigate that very insistence on the film's part to show the enormity of their wealth. Given that the film's audience obviously is not supposed to belong to the von Bulows' circle, to make the von Bulows entertaining is to allow the audience to relate to them. Were they depicted as "realistically" as Dershowitz's legal team, the spectators might get so upset at realizing the extent of the von Bulows' privileges compared to their own few, that the film could very well become if not painful, certainly unpleasurable.

Obviously any Hollywood film aims at the widest possible audience, and thus each laugh produced in the theatre is always primarily motivated by economic reasons. However at the same time, *Reversal Of Fortune*, by restricting its comedy to the von Bulows' scenes, turns this wish/need to entertain its audience into yet another self-reflexive commentary,

in this case a commentary on the ideological representation of wealth in our mass media.

Through, for example, its shamelessly hyperbolic use of supermarket tabloids' clichés such as "the *very* beautiful soap opera actress," or the wildly romanticized episodes of Sunny and Claus falling in love, the film seems to suggest that enormous wealth often gets displaced in media representations underneath other "things" such as sex (preferably perverse sexual practices), romantic love, murder, scandals, tragedies, etc. This displacement has great ideological significance in that it is only through it that the unbridgeable gap between humongous wealth and middle-class life (the purported corner-stone of Western ideology) can be crossed: "the rich are just like us. They do what we do, only better."

As Claus tells Dershowitz during their first "proper" lunch at Delmonico's: "In America, it's fame rather than class." And, of course, he is right, above all if we interpret this statement as meaning: in American class can be dealt with only when it gets displaced onto fame. Again, the point being that, *unlike* class, fame is truly democratic, i.e., potentially attainable by anybody.

Reversal Of Fortune's greatest merit is that, despite coming into being as a potentially very apt vehicle to reproduce this displacement mechanism (the von Bulows becoming interesting only when an alleged murder takes place), the film insists, on the one hand, on showing the materiality of humongous wealth (the "cottages," Sunny's golden and marble bathroom, the Fifth Avenue apartment), and, on the other, on self-reflexively foregrounding the danger inherent in this representation. This danger being, of course, that of convincing the audience that these places are nothing more than the "very beautiful" stages upon which an all too familiar and recognizable human drama takes place (i.e., the widely shared experience of the breaking up of a couple).

"It's easy to forget all this is about me," Sunny's soul tells us at one point about halfway through the film. I take this to be the film's way of warning us, once again, not to become too enmeshed in the "silliness" of the hermeneutics of the legal process, but, instead, to pay attention where it is due: to Sunny. But what else is Sunny, if not a perfect metaphorical embodiment of America in the 1980s? Think about it. Humongous wealth paralyzed in a self-destroying refusal to do anything but let itself feed on itself (Sunny would not let Claus work; clearly nobody has done anything in her family since the death of her father). Just like America in the 1980s, she drunkenly stumbles her way to annihilation, achieving a certain degree of self-consciousness only when it appears to be no longer useful. Indeed one would be very hard-pressed to find in recent Hollywood cinema a better description of pre-recessionary America than the one Sunny's soul offers of herself: "Brain dead, body better than ever!"

8. David Denby, "Too Claus For Comfort," a review of the film published in *New York* (Oct. 29 1990), p. 89.

This article is dedicated, of course, to William G. Simon, with thanks to David Alan Black.

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Spike Lee's Homophobia



by Robert K. Lightning

Is Spike Lee homophobic? Such would seem to be the consensus among a growing number of observers if commentary from acquaintances and occasionally in non-mainstream publications (e.g., Harold McNeil Robinson in a recent *B and G*), is any indication. A recent showing of Marlon Rigg's *Tongues Untied* at the Museum of Modern Art also supports this conclusion. Included in the film as an example of anti-gay material in recent black arts was the step show scene from Lee's *School Daze* (isolating the "fellas" routine where the use of the word "fag" is

prominent). The inclusion of this clip went completely unchallenged by audience members (save this writer) during commentary to the film's director at the conclusion and this writer's challenge (though admittedly badly expressed) garnered no support. While we are at it we might ask also if Lee is a chauvinist for as critic Robin Wood has pointed out a heterosexual male's attitude toward one "other" (gays) can often be determined from his attitude toward another (women). Although this correlation is not so easy in Lee's case and although I will deal primarily with the treatment of homosexuality in Lee's work, a brief glance at his women will help shed light on a subject — sexual relations and contemporary sex roles — that, while prominently featured in his work, rarely gets treated in any discourse on Lee, all of which usually begins and ends on the subject of race.¹

1. An exception to this rule is the article "Daze of Our Lives" (*Village Voice*, 3/22/88) in which several critics give brief comments on the film (accompanied by an interview with the film's director). Many of the issues that concern me here were originally raised in that article, most notably by critics Lisa Kennedy, Hilton Als, Toni Chin, and Donald Suggs.

That brief glance at Lee's women would seem to provide a dismal view. In *School Daze* there is the marginalization of the "jigs," the only "liberated" women on campus. Of all groups depicted they are the one least developed and examined. *Do the Right Thing* presents in diagrammatic form (suited to its allegory-like nature) a traditional view of men as active, and women as (not so much passive as) inactive: the climactic riot is male dominated, the only prominent women dissuading the men from action (Jade), pushed away from the action (the Korean grocer) or energized by the riot (the inert Mother/Sister). But one need look no further than Lee's presentation of that female position that least conforms to patriarchal definition and control, lesbianism, to judge his limitations. The lesbian of *She's Gotta Have It* spouts enlightened ideas on bi-sexuality and is used successfully to underline the sexual paranoia of Jamie, the most serious lover of the film's sexually liberated heroine, Nola. Lee's progressiveness is only apparent. The lesbian character is also opportunistic and predatory, her alliance with Nola more conspiratorial than empowering. The sexual pleasure she offers Nola (which Nola resists), apparently free of male possessiveness, is anything but free. In the end she appears as stupid as the men, Nola, like Lee, using her merely to undermine Jamie. Lee, however, cannot be dismissed that easily. Later in the film Jamie sexually assaults Nola (although she initiates the sexual act it is clearly painful and she asks him to stop). While Lee might be criticized for a limited understanding of a woman's reaction to such an occurrence (described by Nola later as "near rape") the scene is highly successful in what it reveals about and to the man. It marks the logical culmination of Lee's uncompromising revelation of Jamie's romantic passion as actually possessiveness and male ego assertion, a bit of self-knowledge more shattering to Jamie than it ever is to Nola. *School Daze* pursues this method even further. If there is no real positive imaging of women in the film it is a horrifying document of their oppression in current hetero relations, making its point through a ruthless indictment of the men and the brutal humiliation (though perfectly justified by the film's method and ultimate achievement) of a compliant woman.

If Lee is homophobic it is of a very particular nature, for paralleling a dismal record of heterosexual relations in almost every film is a male relationship that is the film's emotional life. *Sarah* ends with a gentleman caller deciding to develop a relationship with the film's belligerent heroine (a Lee prototype) because of his feelings for her young son. *Joe's Bed Stuy* — *We Cut Heads* ends with the hero about to meet possible death (at the hands of gangsters) not with his wife but his young male ward. One scene in *She's Gotta Have It* is particularly exemplary. Jamie, his relationship with Nola over yet apparently left emotionally shattered by his experiences with her, sits philosophizing with Mars Blackmon, another ex-suitor, on the subject of Nola. They argue, unable to resolve their different opinions until the subject of basketball is introduced, whereupon an immediate camaraderie is established, Jamie displaying his only signs of pleasure outside of the film's flashbacks. Here we have in a nutshell Lee's attitude to hetero relations and his

parallel attitude to the buddy relationship. The former is unresolvable, agonizing even in memory and a source of conflict between the men. This is counterpointed by the ease of the male relationship (when the subject under discussion isn't women), which generates more genuine affection and empathy than any of Lee's hetero couplings. At its worst the establishing of the male couple can be regressive (*Joe's Bed Stuy*) or can be used to express a deep conservatism (the covert attack on Sarah as single mother). But at its best it can be healing, marking the resolution of conflict and destructive behavior as it does supremely in the endings of both *School Daze* and *Do the Right Thing*.

Accusations of homophobia would seem to center on one film, *School Daze*, and in particular on one scene, the step show, where the word "fag" is used. Of course the use of insulting terminology by an artist is not so important as the use that is made of it and in what context. Earlier in the film the term is used by an individual member of the Gammies (the frat pledges) followed shortly by a group chant of "Pass the pussy." There homophobia and grotesque sexual references combine to clarify the immaturity of the pledges, an interpretation amply confirmed by their behavior the night of their initiation. In the step show, however, the word is given to the fellas, of the three male groups depicted the most admirable and under the leadership of the politically enlightened Dap. It is for these reasons that the scene deserves closer examination. First it must be noted however that Lee's methodology in *School Daze* involves the revelation of similarities between opposing groups. The film's very first scene presents the fellas as politically aware and responsible and opposed to the neo-fascist, sexist, assimilationist fraternity (the Gammas) but by the time of the step show this initial impression of difference has been qualified by the fellas' compromised politics and lighthearted sexism. In addition, the opposition is strongly colored as a *personal* antagonism between Dap and the Gamma president, Julian.

The Step Show, an athletic dance ("Step") competition between male groups, traditionally frats, begins with neither the fellas nor the Gammas but another frat. In retrospect this can be seen to generalize the sexism most strongly associated with the Gammas as a characteristic of the frat world (the all male group demonstrating its athletic ability to an admiring audience, the most prominent female members of that audience functioning as cheerleaders). But this is also a symptom of campus society and perhaps beyond, the competition performed as popular entertainment testifying to this fact. The scene links thematically to two earlier events: the football game and the crowning of Miss Mission, the former developing the theme of exclusive male competition, the latter the sexism theme (through the objectification of women. Both these earlier events receive not only popular acceptance but administrative sanction through the presence of the dean and his wife). The Gammas emerge as Zorro-like caped figures, their outfits underlining the extremes of sexism they represent (they, like Zorro, are out-laws even among the frats). Their routine comes to involve the interweaving of their bodies to form, more than once, a giant phallus, making clear the event is less a display of athletics than sexual prowess. The fellas perform next their





She's Gotta Have It: Nola (Tracy Camila Johns) and Jamie (Redmond Hicks)

routine, part parody of the event, part putdown of the Gammas, in which the word "fag" is used (complete with stereotypical gay gestures) to put down not only the Gammas but gays. As they chant they march over and over, distinctly forming a circle. The circle imagery links naturally with the preceding phallus. Although the routine is parody it is difficult to imagine it functioning on this consciously symbolic level (which would require prior knowledge of the Gamma routine by the fellas to make any sense) and we must then assume directorial comment. The suggestion then is of a sexual relationship, on some level, between the Gammas and the fellas, a suggestion reinforced by Lee having the fellas provoke a fight, as they exit, not with the Gammas but their women (the Gamma Rays) as if they were a rival gang. The symbolism suggests not only a sexual connection between the two rival male groups but introduces the possibility on a broader level that the demonstrations of machismo are less for the audience than for the other competing males.

What I am trying to demonstrate is that *School Daze*, often misinterpreted as an indulgence of male sexual hijinks, is actually a powerful critique of them and that a scene in which the word "fag" is used by one male group ends by suggesting a sexual connection (on some unexplained level) between that group and another male group which in turn is an ironic comment on the macho proceedings and on the use of the word "fag." *School Daze* is a devastating document of current heterosexual relations and the restrictions placed on both sexes within its confines. As this scene suggests *School Daze* has a discernible homosexual

subtext and in answer to accusations of homophobia it is the aspect that I shall examine, hoping this will inspire a re-examination of the film. For ironically, in light of the accusations, it is this subtext that is the most positive element of the film, leading to the resolution of conflict between the film's chief antagonists, Dap and Julian, an act that signals (in the context of this film and beyond) growth and fundamental change. To examine this aspect of the film I turn to the surer hands of critic Robin Wood, specifically his essay on Scorsese's *Raging Bull* in his examination of 80s cinema *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. There Wood invoked Freud to illustrate the character Jake La Motta's repressed homosexuality (the repression resulting in his violence and paranoia) and through him the repression in our society of constitutional bisexuality (another of Freud's discoveries), the undefined sexuality of every human infant. It is patriarchy (whose continuance depends on constructing men as "masculine" and women as "feminine"), that attempts to direct the infant's sexuality into exclusive heterosexual expression (the unfortunate consequences of this process I will return to later). The potentially dire consequences to the individual of the resulting repression of any bi- or homosexual expression (or even the recognition of such desires within the individual), both films make clear.

According to Freud's theories on paranoia (noted at the end of his analysis of the Schreber case) the repressed desires are expressed in certain forms of paranoid delusions, all contradicting the proposition "I love him." Three of these are relevant to Lee's antagonists, Dap and Julian.

1) I don't love him — I hate him." Perhaps the most relevant form to our antagonists although superficially covered by their political differences and the verbal suggestions of a former friendship. Still their feud remains on the surface, remarkably unexplained, necessitating a recourse to psychoanalytic theory.

2) The Don Juan syndrome ("I don't love men — I love women"). Although he is associated with only one woman (Jane) this is obviously relevant to Julian who (it later becomes clear) is trying to rid himself of her, the woman most coveted by the Gammas (it turns out to pursue one of her fellows). Lee presents her as object for the gaze both at the coronation and the parade and this combined with Julian's ultimate indifference to her underlines her sole function as status symbol and living confirmation of Julian's heterosexual identity.

Dap on the other hand is hardly presented as a womanizer, his feelings for his girlfriend Rachel being best described as ambivalent. He only becomes actively committed once she has gone. Thus her declaration at one point that he loves her for political reasons ("...one of the darker sisters on campus") is never really refuted by his behavior. This clearly parallels Julian's use of Jane as campus status symbol and symbol of his heterosexual identity. Dap's attempt to re-establish his relationship with Rachel can easily be read as an attempt to suppress the homosexual desire that threatens to surface.

3) Freud's final category contains an explanation of the close relationship of paranoia to megalomania ("I love only myself"), a sexual over-valuation of the ego. For Julian this

concept is expressed in the film's most monstrous act: His compelling Jane to sleep with Dap's cousin, Half-Pint, an act that singularly achieves the desired elimination of Jane, removes Half-Pint as an object of desire (his virginity, suggestive of sexual ambivalence, having proved a pique to Julian throughout) and finally establishes his victory in the long feud with Dap — all at fundamental cost to his humanity.

For Dap the symptoms are less obvious, but become so in his increasingly self-righteous isolation, his insistence that he is always politically correct and all others are wrong. Like Julian he comes close to totally alienating those who care for him, his behavior finding interesting (if more extreme) parallels in Scorsese's *La Motta*. (A fourth category, sexual delusions of jealousy, is not relevant to the Dap/Julian relationship but surfaces briefly in the female feud, when Jane accused Rachel of coveting Julian, an unfounded accusation that suggests Lee had considered a more expansive treatment of paranoia that would have included his female characters.)

The repression of bi- or homosexual desire is a necessary component of patriarchy's construction of the sexes but what are the consequences of this construction of men (the film's primary concern)? On the personal level, that is, as it involves the Dap/Julian relationship, the result is a feud characterized as a series of acts of one-up-manship culminating in Julian's act of revenge, where characters are reduced to pawns. His behavior clearly relates to what society demands of men: to be dominant and in control, to not be "topped." Lee's critique also functions on social and political levels. The disorder into which parade, football game and step show are thrown can be related to the personal feud but the latter two have inherent disruptive qualities. Both celebrate man's construction as competitor but underlying this is, again, the need to dominate. The fans' infection by the competitive spirit is evident in both events as is the violence that erupts when the drive to win (read dominate) is frustrated (football game) or when the tension of repressed sexuality can no longer be redirected (step show). Robin Wood notes that the logical result of this construction/repression is nuclear war and for me the escalation of the Dap/Julian feud has always found a parallel in the (apparently) now-historical arms race, a parallel given support by the pervasive military references throughout ("Stepping" is clearly rooted in military drills). The feud's disruption of campus stability parallels the potential global destruction of nuclear warfare (that would go quite beyond U.S. and Soviet borders). The keen insight the film offers into both levels of conflict (man vs. man, nation vs. nation) is that both result from assertions of the male ego, a direct result of society's construction. (Although I would hardly propose this as the *only* reason for the arms race.)

If the film's negative aspects result from the traditional construction of men then, logically, any potential for positive development relates to its undermining. Thus Dap and Julian, apparently poised at the conclusion for a final cataclysmic battle, instead face each other and, looking deep into each other's eyes, signal a mutual recognition of their destructive behavior. At the time of the film's release Lisa Kennedy quipped (in the *Village Voice*) "Why don't they just

kiss?" and this succinctly makes the point: their proximity and exchanged looks are an effective variation on classical Hollywood's fade-out kiss (which would signal the formation of the heterosexual couple and patriarchy's continuance). The formation of the homosexual couple signals a new order (though qualified by the dream-like quality of the conclusion). The presence of the entire campus links this formation to other issues raised in the film. Half-Pint's proximity to Jane, both having gone through humiliating initiations, marks them both as patriarchy's pawns. Rachel's presence reminds us of the (attempted) oppression of women by even the politically "enlightened" (Dap). The dean and his wife (whose only function throughout was to announce dinner and accompany her husband to school functions) extends this idea to marriage. In spite of its apparent homophobic signifiers this important film deserves a re-evaluation.

THIS ESSAY WAS WRITTEN roughly three years ago and while there are inevitable minor points I would change, my opinion of *She's Gotta Have It* is one major area of revision. Since then I have become aware of the work of certain women writers, particularly black feminist (e.g., bell hooks in her *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*) which has called into question the film's liberal attitude, revealing its covert attack on transgressive female sexuality, making arguments with which, for the most part, I agree. I still find the film full of contradictions, however, contradictions that go beyond those found in a reactionary text with phony liberal signifiers. The rape has been much discussed, the issues having been raised of Lee's presentation of Nola's possible complicity. My own responses have been so varied that at the time I wrote this essay I did not even refer to it as rape. It seems to me that, when considering this scene, one should take into account (and to my knowledge no one has in print) two preceding scenes: the first showing Nola's lesbian acquaintance attempting to seduce Nola; the second showing Nola engaged in auto-erotic activity (which is immediately followed by Nola's phone call to Jamie and, later, the rape). A possible reading of these scenes could suggest an interesting subtext: that Nola, a woman so apparently free, is actually so oppressed by patriarchal dictates that she cannot accept her own potential bi-sexuality and is not only willing to accept punishment in the form of rape but is willing to crawl back to her violator (at least temporarily). At this time, I find not only the rape but the film as a whole unresolvably problematic and ask readers to view even my brief references as at least now qualified by some doubt (I am not sure for instance that, in Lee's presentation, the knowledge that Jamie acquires is any more "shattering" than the confirmation of his self-righteous desire to contain Nola).

One last point of reconsideration: it is clear to me now that my original question ("Is Spike Lee homophobic?") was too simplistic, that the most we can expect to garner about an artist from his/her work are certain sympathies or tendencies, even strongly contradictory tendencies. Regarding *School Daze* we have Lee expressing his more progressive tendencies and therefore we have Lee at his best.

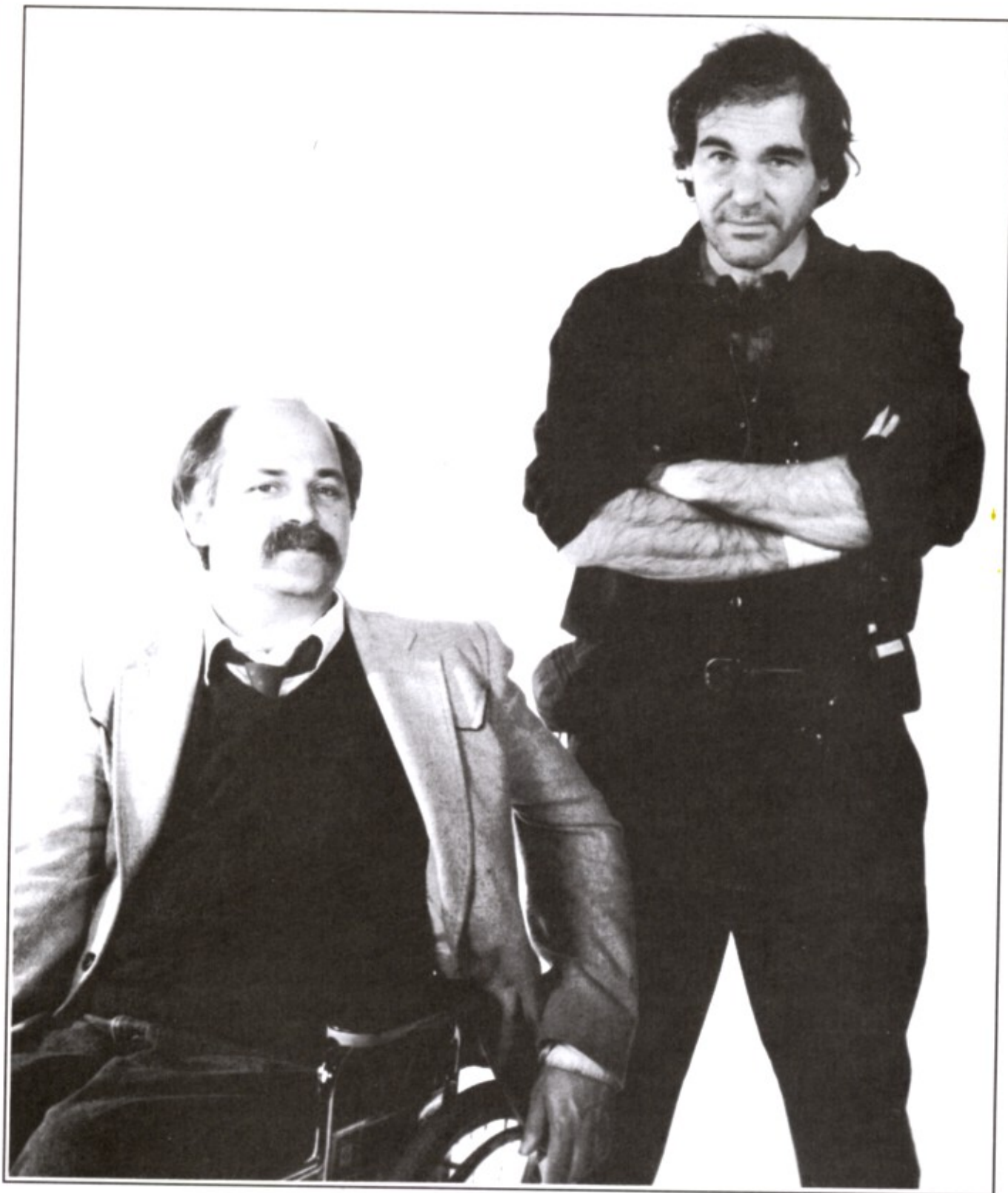
OLIVER STONE

LESS THAN MEETS THE EYE

by Tony Williams

In an era witnessing Hollywood cinema's intellectual bankruptcy, the work of Oliver Stone appears to offer a welcome alternative. Some critics see Stone's films as containing refreshing radical dimensions absent from mainstream cinema since the late 70s. Controversy attending the release of *J.F.K.* (1991) has drawn public attention to the dubious nature of official interpretations concerning the Kennedy assassination. Many call for the release of officially classified documents. Stone's adaptation of Ron Kovic's polemical cry of rage, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) seems to contain progressive features particularly in opposing the political establishment's betrayal of the Vietnam generation. Without denying the existence of certain positive features in his work, closer examination reveals disturbing features contradicting any claims for accepting Stone as a radical director combining the political with the personal. Indeed, any argument must include extra- as well as intra-textual concerns to assess his work adequately. A purely personal response is not enough. It often needs the alliance of appropriate theoretical tools properly to ascertain the real significance.

This article is based on two conference papers: "The Threatening Gaze in *Born on the Fourth of July*" and "*Born on the Fourth of July*: An 80s Male Melodrama," delivered respectively at the 1991 Society for Cinema Studies Conference and the 1992 Popular Culture Association Conference. I wish to thank the *cineACTION* editorial board for their constructive comments during the various stages of preparation.



Ron Kovic and Oliver Stone

In making this argument I understand the dangers within contemporary criticism of forcing any film into "the crustean bed of theory" and thereby drowning its distinctive nature. At the same time, it is now doubtful whether any type of criticism can occur mainly on the personal level without considering other factors influencing individual authorship. As Antony Easthope (1991) recently asserts concerning literary (and by implication, film) theory, 70s and 80s theoretical tools "acquired a radical political edge because they made visible norms and attitudes literary study had previously been able to hide away under the cloak of empiricism with the cry, 'this is so, isn't it?' Once unveiled, many of those assumptions turned out to be pretty nasty" (11).

Despite his deceptively radical veneer, Oliver Stone's personality and work contain nasty elements deeply offensive to many including feminists and progressive Vietnam veterans. In making the case *contra* Stone I do not wish to fall into any debilitating mode of "political correctness." My response is initially personal. But, unless supported by relevant theoretical tools, the personal may be entirely mistaken. One then falls for the twentieth century cinematic equivalent of Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*, a parallel not entirely inapplicable to Oliver Stone. A need definitely exists to combine recent developments in critical and cultural theory with the personal response to effectively interrogate dubious cinematic texts. By continuing amidst a world of political inactivity, malaise, and certain scholastic retreats into alienated realms of dead-end theories, *cineACTION* remains a welcome stimulus. This is especially so for those academics and graduate students secretly admiring its integrity in a vicious scholarly world insisting on rigid conformity and confinement to "the" respectable journals. But, as Karl Marx discovered, the personal is not enough. By spending countless years researching in the British Museum he produced radical works illustrating the concealed, oppressive mechanisms of capitalist society. Despite the time involved his retreat was neither escapist nor monastic. Each film necessitates a similar form of investigation, combining theoretical rigor with personal response. Despite theory gaining a bad reputation over the last few decades, it can yield valuable insights if used responsibly and not to the exclusion of other equally valid approaches. The personal is not only political but also theoretical. They should all exist in an equal relationship with each other. In this manner the wary viewer avoids the cinematic trickery of the Oliver Stones.

As John Caughie concludes in his influential anthology, *Theories of Authorship*, any examination of a director now necessitates investigation of intersecting discursive factors concerning gender, industry, economics, society, and history. Contrary to most interpretations, Caughie's conclusions did not fully affirm the still fashionable "death of the author" thesis. Rather, he argued for considering determining factors influencing the personal approach in film directing. Authorship is really an intricate composition. It necessitates close investigation of all relevant factors, an approach neither "scholarly" or irrelevant.

There is always the danger of sterile intellectualizing. As

Robin Wood (1979) points out, "The richness of an artist's work often arises from the dramatization of tensions and contradictions that intellectual awareness may actually inhibit and impoverish" (85). But there is often a very thin line between dramatization and reactionary exploitation especially when the director lives in an era when negative ideological implications within certain dramatizations are commonly known. No director would dream of reproducing John Wayne's notorious "spanking" of Maureen O'Hara in *McLintock* (1963) in any Western made today. The device was a common patriarchal treatment of the "sassy woman." I remember a 50s episode of *Wagon Train* when Robert Horton performed the same "disciplinary" function upon Susan Oliver's rear. (But, as we know, 80s cinema uses the more drastic "cutting edges" of Jason, Michael, and Freddy). However, Cimino's racist treatment of the North Vietnamese in *The Deer Hunter* (1978) was, and still is, entirely reprehensible. It can not be entirely excused by arguing for its veracity as a mythological construct by comparison to Ford's treatment of the Indians in *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939). As a right-wing (though complex) patriarch, Ford worked in a time when consciousness concerning the aftermath of white genocide policies against Native Americans was extremely limited. Cimino directed *The Deer Hunter* in a different era fully realizing (but attempting to deny) similar strategies against the Vietnamese, countless millions of whom died before, during and after (from Agent Orange and other effects of biological warfare) the Vietnam War. To excuse this appalling Russian roulette scene on the grounds of "artistic authenticity" (Wood, 1986, 273) is extremely offensive. Similarly, claiming Oliver Stone as a radical director and neglecting his reactionary sexist, racist, and ideological stances presents an extremely limited perspective. These factors also need condemnation, not excuses.

The American cultural tradition still exerts a strong influence on Hollywood cinema as recent studies demonstrate. None to date has examined this influence on Oliver Stone. With the exception of Christopher Sharrett, Don Kunz, and Robin Wood, critical response to *Born on the Fourth of July* is almost unanimously hostile. An excessively hyperbolic review in *Cahiers du Cinéma* drew attention to its neglected cinematic antecedents. Iannis Katsahias noted Stone's affinities to Griffith and Ford (27). These directors, along with Frank Capra and Leo McCarey, made certain films in the American populist tradition. It is this tradition that influences Oliver Stone, a tradition which is by no means either progressive or radical.

The term "radical" needs precise definition in this particular context. As Raymond Williams (1983) demonstrates, the term is capable of several meanings not all of them progressively or necessarily "radical" in the sense we would understand it. "The choice of radical, especially in the United States though it has been imitated in Europe and elsewhere, can probably be related to mC20 difficulties in the definitions of SOCIALIST and COMMUNIST...Radical seemed to offer a way of avoiding dogmatic and factional associations while reasserting the need for vigorous and fundamental change" (252). The associations are not exclu-

sive to the left as the existence of the "radical" right shows. Similarly, Stone's work is not revolutionary. It represents rather a "populist" vein clamoring for either reform or return to traditional American democratic ideals.²

Stemming from Jeffersonian and Jacksonian roots in opposition to conservative Federalist principles, the diverse strands resulting in the Populist movement "called not for equality or levelling but the restoration of the equality of opportunity" (Richards, 1973, 226). Its declared enemy was any monopoly on the part of the institutional status quo whether government, business, or military establishment. Embracing many elements such as Edward Bellamy's utopian ideals to William Jennings Bryan's religious fundamentalism, the movement was singularly unresponsive to nineteenth century minority groups such as feminists, blacks, native Americans and foreign immigrants. Populism represented a cry of the newly disenfranchised against the powerful monopoly institutions that were actively destroying middle-class patterns of existence. The movement appealed to now outmoded Jeffersonian sentiments concerning "democracy in political and economic life and a fair standard for all to achieve a reasonable standard of life" (Richards, 227). Stone's use of Eisenhower's warning against the growing military-industrial complex at the opening of *J.F.K.* is one such example of populist sentiment. The movement could embrace right-wing tendencies such as anti-feminism. Its cinematic inheritors shared similar ideals ranging from Ford's patriarchal communities, Frank Capra's hatred of F.D.R. and support of Mussolini in the 30s,³ to Leo McCarey's virulent anti-intellectualism and anti-communism. Populism was by no means radical, as its attitude towards women and minorities revealed. Oliver Stone's work also contains notorious reactionary tendencies which equate his supposed progressiveness with Huey Long's notorious demagoguery. He articulates the cries of insecure 90s males, bereft of their previously secure patriarchal stakes in society, who mourn their contemporary "castrations." Stone's work has deep connections with conservative male melodramas. Both style and content reveal the presence of hysterical mechanisms undermining the claims of any of his films as being "radical." Despite their political overtones, *Salvador* and *Talk Radio* present the common imagery of whining males, protesting at their contemporary impotence, often oppressing women as a substitute for the missing phallus. The political is a convenient pretext. Stone's films are really conservative male melodramas mourning the loss of "real" masculinity.

THE WOMAN QUESTION

Before offering a detailed analysis of Stone's problematic *Born on the Fourth of July*, I wish to counter Robin Wood's (1990-1991) statement concerning Stone's hostility to women, especially the mother-figure. Noting the film's treatment of Mrs. Kovic, he asserts that "I don't think the films supply enough evidence for one to assert that this is something personal to Stone (it may derive largely from the source material) but it is not inconsistent with the apparent

inability to identify with a female position manifested in the other films" (64). However, there not only exists enough evidence concerning Stone's hostility to his own mother but the actual evidence of the source material itself to contradict this statement. Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* rarely mentions his actual mother. In this particular instance it is essential to read the original source material to fully understand the changes both Stone and Kovic made to a text which was more decidedly radical than its cinematic version. Mrs. Kovic appears briefly in the novel. She even visits her son in hospital and does get upset at her son's drunken condition. But she is certainly not the film's "castrating maternal bitch." Donna is another of Stone's fantasy creations. Most of Stone's films contain the figure of the bad mother which is certainly very personal to him.

The Hand (1981) was not "the first film Stone both wrote and directed" (Wood, 64). In 1973, he directed and co-scripted from his own story, *Seizure*. Although extremely confused, amateurish, and almost unwatchable, *Seizure* contains many of the seeds of later Stone. Its main protagonist is a horror writer (Jonathan Frid) whose personal creative demons erupt one weekend in the form of three of his own literary creations. Martine Beswick's misogynistically defined "Queen of Evil" not only anticipates Mrs. Kovic but also the dark-witch mother figure, Patricia, of *The Doors*. Eventually, Stone's hero awakens in the morning. It was only a dream. But, horror of horrors!, the Queen of Evil is in bed beside him, occupying his wife's place, causing him to die of a heart attack!

Even *The Hand* contains several reactionary elements. It is undoubtedly a seriously neglected work focussing on a monstrous male-ego, another writer Jon Lansdale (Michael Caine). Oliver Stone makes a Hitchcock author-in-the-text appearance as the menacing derelict who also lacks a hand. However, although Stone essays significant insights into patriarchal monstrosity (suitably embodied in right-wing Thatcherite devotee Michael Caine), his depictions of women are again extremely problematic. Although his wife seeks independence she is less than honest in not informing him of her changed desires until she abruptly announces it during her Washington State visit. His community college student "lover" is more reminiscent of a college professor's imaginary "wet dream," as any sexual harassment victim knows. Lansdale's final murder of the female psychiatrist (Viveca Lindfors) contains several negative overtones, particularly one of a pushy, dominating, inquisitive woman getting her "just" deserts. Claiming *The Hand* as one of "the small category of feminist horror films" (66) is as problematic as convincing a feminist audience of the merits of *Dressed to Kill*.

Oliver Stone's treatment of women has certain significant roots within the American cultural tradition. Both Mrs. Kovic and Patricia are cinematic incarnations of Philip Wylie's notorious castrating Mom from his influential 50s text, *A Generation of Vipers*. As Michael Rogin (1984) superbly documents, this figure influenced many contem-

2. I wish to acknowledge *Vietnam Generation* Book Review Editor Dan Scripture for raising this issue during my Popular Culture Association presentation.

3. A point raised by Christopher Sharrett.

porary cultural representations. Working in a notoriously reactionary era, it is not surprising that Oliver Stone resurrects this convenient "scapegoat" figure. Wylie called on the American male to reject Mom's influence. Oliver has his Ron Kovic utter the magic, patriarchal words, "Fucking Penis!" to expel mother from the text and begin the path to self-healing.

BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY AS CONSERVATIVE MALE MELODRAMA

As the second in his proposed Vietnam trilogy, *Born on the Fourth of July* deserves a detailed theoretical and thematic analysis to outline its place in the negative canon of 80s Hollywood cinema. Far from presenting an alternative to current patriarchal structures, the film aims to restore the phallus, if not the penis, to its hero so that he can successfully complete the Oedipal trajectory. If not as blatant as the Lucas-Spielberg corpus in its techniques, *Born on the Fourth of July* is a cleverly-concealed entry presenting once again "the same old story." The film presents a castrated hero. What is Hollywood to do with such a creation, particularly in the more masculinized era of Stallone, Seagal and Schwarzenegger? There are precedents.

Both during and after World War II Hollywood attempted dealing with disabled and mentally disturbed servicemen in works such as *Pride of the Marines* (1944), *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Till The End of Time* (both 1946), and *The Men* (1950). Oedipus was in crisis, particularly with Marlon Brando's literally castrated figure in *The Men*. This particular historical era presented some progressive dislocations within both American cinema and contemporary ideology. Kaja Silverman (1990) demonstrates that the historical moment influencing these films resulted in an interrogation of the dominant fictions having drastic consequences for both patriarchal phallic power and male subjectivity. Analyzing *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Silverman notes that it "refuses to suspend belief in the face either of the dominant fiction or its phallic representations, insisting that the ideological formations of pre-war America are incapable of resolving the contradictions of post-war America, and consequently of concealing male lack" (114-115). Many of these films contain female characters asserting scopophilic and narrative control usually attributed to the male. A potentially new relationship between the sexes results. The male acknowledges his physical and/or symbolic vulnerability with the female playing a significant role. The nearest *Born on the Fourth of July* approaches this is with Ron's encounter with the Mexican hooker. He may weep but he becomes a "man." However, Maria Elena's role parallels the sympathetic mother rather than Silverman's definition of the 40s female. She is there to perform a function for Stone's hero. Once achieved she becomes as disposable as his other females. Later scenes show the prostitutes viewed from Ron's point-of-view arrayed according to Laura Mulvey's relevant tenet (at least, here) of the female as object of the male gaze.

Born on the Fourth of July never achieves Silverman's def-

inition of this potential revolutionary goal. It reveals a male hysterically reacting to his loss of male mastery wishing to enter a system which has resulted in the destruction of his body. As a product of a predominantly reactionary Hollywood system, *Born on the Fourth of July* operates to restore Ron to the patriarchal system. In contrast to its original source material, Stone's version utilizes the conservative mechanisms of male melodrama to reassert patriarchal mastery at the cost of disavowing alternative historical, political, racial, and gender formations.⁴ While *The Best Years of Our Lives* presented Virginia Mayo's Marie as the solitary bad female enemy reacting against Fred's (Dana Andrews) lack of phallic prowess, *Born on the Fourth of July* presents several Maries, most notably Mrs. Kovic (Caroline Kava), who actively hinder Ron's Oedipal odyssey towards regaining the phallus. Despite its hero's status, Stone's work is another entry in Susan Jeffords' listing of the remasculinization of America in American literature and film.

Its melodramatic nature, recognized by many critics, is not accidental. According to Jackie Byars, certain conservative Hollywood melodramas took over the functions of blacklisted post-war social problem films arguing that only a return to traditional family values and structures would suffice (112-131). Byars' description of 50s social melodramas deserves quoting since it echoes *Born on the Fourth of July*'s conclusion.

"Although the male must remain separate and capable of individual action, he and his problems are domesticated. The solution — the riddance of deviancy — inevitably results from his individual action and includes reintegration into the domestic-civilized order. The political becomes domestic, political action personal... The social problem films are motivated by a structuring absence, expressed through a loss of family, a loss involving one of the things most valued by Americans of the period. In each of these films, the primary male character's reactions to, or attempts to cope with, his loss are deviant, and they extend beyond the immediate individuals to affect their families and communities. Though the films gesture towards realism in their attempts to describe an unpleasant but scientifically explicable society, ultimately the force of a disintegrating family pushes toward emotional excess better categorized as melodrama, and the films are plotted to leave the viewer (and the protagonists) exhausted as well as triumphant. In the end, as the deviant male character is finally reintegrated into the domestic and communal order, the order is redefined. In depicting deviance, then, these films forcefully portray the range of the permissible, the norm, the ideal" (116).

4. Also recognized by Viveca Gretton and Tom Orman, "Regarding Men: Disease and Affliction in Contemporary Male Melodrama," *cineACTION* 26/27 (Winter 1992): 120. For one recent example seeing melodrama as encompassing "a broad range of films marked by 'lapses' in realism, by 'excesses' of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive" (3) see Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (Summer 1991): 2-13.



Born on the Fourth of July

Exhibiting an overblown style (see variously Canby, Ansen, Sharrett, McKinney, Fuchs) leaving one with the feeling of "being manhandled by a cinematic bully" (Ansen), *Born on the Fourth of July* notes Ron's deviant attempts to cope with his loss as he moves from his literal family towards other substitutes (the veterans' Mexican venue) until he finally fulfills mother's desire of stepping into J.F.K.'s shoes by speaking about "great things" at the 1976 Democratic Party convention, an event establishing his reintegration into the American Body Politic. Ron Kovic can only proceed within the permissible cinematic realms of 80s Hollywood, his rage directed at convenient maternal figures or dark fathers such as Richard M. Nixon, contemporary Hollywood's surrogate Darth Vader.

Born on the Fourth of July operates according to a particular fear of the feminine. During the film several narrative segments all conclude with a rapid cut to black punctuating certain traumatic events threatening male hegemony.

The opening sequence introduces Stone's fear of the feminine haunting the film. As Ron Kovic's voice-over narration describes 1950 Massapequa, Long Island, an overhead shot views young Ron and his friends playing in Sally's Wood. This initial view anticipates the sequence's final image when the audience gazes at Ron's prone humiliation from this dominating perspective. The feminine environment of Sally's Wood conceals Ron's attackers who rush out at him. "Bang! Bang! You're dead, Ron Kovic!" Overpowered by both camera and buddies, Ron lies in a passive, "feminized" position. The sequence ends in the first of several rapid cuts to black enunciating Ron's various castrations during the course of the film. This pre-credit sequence enunciates *Born on the Fourth of July*'s inherent reactionary textual structure as a work of castration anxiety firmly based on fear of the feminine. Although Sally's Wood does feature in the original source its brief mention (55) contains none of the fearful cinematic connotations Stone gives it.

Then follows the opening credit sequence, one containing ominous overtones. It begins with an exploding firecracker set off near a girl's legs. This anticipates Ron's future Vietnam trauma with the dangerous feminine realm already revealed in Sally's Wood. The original source opens with a perverse poem appearing in ironic contrast to Kennedy's inaugural address. "I am the living death/ the memorial day on wheels/ I am your yankee doodle dandy/ your John Wayne come home/ your fourth of July firecracker/ exploding in the grave." Oliver Stone and Ron Kovic (who as co-scenarist also bears full responsibility) change the original anti-Kennedy dimensions to a visual anti-female critique.

The camera cranes up to view the Fourth of July parade. Ron views the marching veterans from his father's shoulders. Mother scolds younger brother Tommy. Among the veterans is a wheelchair-bound sergeant (played by Ron Kovic himself) flinching at the sound of an exploding firecracker. Then a middle-aged armless veteran marches past. He and Ron exchange looks. We immediately recognize the figure as one of Oliver Stone's "Elijah" signifiers from *Moby Dick* ominously foreshadowing the hero's fate. The exchange of looks parallels those between Chris Taylor and

the burnt-out returning veteran in *Platoon*'s opening scenes. In this instance, the castration associations need little emphasis. The dangerous feminine world soon erupts to destabilize young Ron.

Running away from her father's voice little Donna presents Ron with a Mickey Mantle baseball cap. As the first female in the film in whose gaze Ron narcissistically basks, she sets in motion a negative chain of events. As Ron puts on his cap, Mrs. Kovic looks on adoringly as Father exclaims, "He's a little firecracker." Then follows a close-up of Mrs. Kovic. "Yes. He's my little Yankee Doodle Boy." The shot is from Ron's perspective. Narcissistically pausing to revel in further female approval, young Ron falls again. Distracted by mother's gaze, his attention lapses allowing a young rival to steal his cap. He sets off in pursuit. Before undergoing necessary entry into the patriarchal order Ron's dependence on the "look" has dangerous consequences. For Oliver Stone, females run the gamut of representation from A to C: admiring doormats, betrayers, or hostile adversaries.

Later that night Ron experiences his first kiss by Donna in Sally's Wood against a background of exploding firecrackers and the American flag. Unenthusiastic over his first "accidental" conquest, he prefers to demonstrate his masculine prowess showing the uninterested Donna how many press-ups he can perform. The scene ends with an ominous high-angle shot as firecrackers continually explode. Until he can enter the patriarchal realm, the female gaze (neutralized in the film's concluding sequence) presents implicit threatening undertones articulating his future castration in Vietnam. (During Ron's later Fourth of July appearance hostile demonstrators, predominantly female, throw firecrackers at him.) Another sequence shows Ron excelling at baseball revealing the admiring female gazes of Mrs. Kovic and Donna looking on in approval at his victory. For *Born on the Fourth of July*, the gaze represents an important stylistic function determining its hero's Oedipal trajectory. Ron will undergo literal castration. But he can still enter the Law of the Father symbolically as he does at the end. The film operates according to a particular structure of gazes, moving from positive to hostile, to positive again based upon a particular process of remasculinization and female subordination.

The credit sequence concludes in a significant manner. As Ron arrives home, he sees his family grouped round the television set watching Kennedy's inaugural speech. The occasion is a family affair as the inter-cut shots show, matching the Kovic family with the group on the screen — aging patriarch Eisenhower, the new heir J.F.K., his alter ego Richard M. Nixon, and passively silent adoring spouse Jackie Kennedy. Mrs. Kovic announces Ron's destiny. "I had a dream last night, that you were speaking to a large crowd, and you were speaking about great things." As young Ron narcissistically basks in her gaze, the shot changes to Kennedy's television speech ironically concluding "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Oliver Stone's directorial credit finally appears "modestly" identifying himself with both young Ron and his hero, J.F.K. *Born on the Fourth of*

July's patriarchally inscribed family-melodramatic project thus begins. As Thierry Kuntzel's influential thesis on the Film Work demonstrates, credit sequences often anticipate any film's climax. Here they outline a scenario which anticipates the final sequence: Ron's return "home" to the extended Democratic Convention family situation where he will perform J.F.K.'s role as patriarchal family spokesman before an audience which Stone represents as dominated by passively acquiescent females.

Following a sequence revealing rigorous high-school training goals — "You're going to pay the price for victory and the price is sacrifice" — Ron (Tom Cruise) returns home. Narcissistically concerned over his weight's effect on his future sports prowess, he faces maternal wrath when she discovers his copy of *Playboy*. She announces his future downfall. "God is going to punish you for this." Mother's curse bears fruit. The next scene shows Ron's humiliation as he loses a wrestling contest. As he falls the school cheers turn to scorn, Stone emphasizing Mrs. Kovic's expression as it turns sourly into contempt. Ron's opposing team is from "Babylon," its name having obvious associations with a Revelations inspired interpretation of Mrs. Kovic as a maternally satanic "Whore" whose curse causes her son's failure. Oliver Stone displaces the weight of any possible cultural critique on to a hostile mother who acts as *dea in machina* in certain editorially related scenes ensuring her son's downfall. The sequence concludes with an overhead shot tracking back to reveal Ron's humiliated body prone on the floor. The image abruptly cuts to black.

Immediately, the next sequence begins, as Don Kunz admirably states: "With the screen dark as a grave, Stone initiates a sound overlap like the door of a burial crypt being opened" (8). Two Marines (one of whom we immediately recognize as bad Sgt. Barnes of *Platoon*) march out. At first sight the sequence appears to offer a cultural critique of American masculinity. But there are other visually opposing motifs diminishing these voices. The sequence ends with the camera craning towards the outside window revealing a tree outside. Cutting to an exterior shot, the camera cranes down to follow Donna and her girlfriends. Reminiscent of Sally's Wood, and associated with Donna, the tree represents another dangerous signifier of the feminine realm which will cause Ron's downfall. We must again remember that the Marine sequence follows Ron's humiliation before mother's hostile gaze. Concluding with Donna's appearance, we thus note that the emphasis lies less upon a radical interrogation of masculine cultural construction than upon an insecure male's desire to regain female respect. The sequence is an interesting example of a process analyzed by Jessica Benjamin concerning the fetishization of social relationships by regarding them as "belonging to nature, so that the results of a process appear ultimately as the cause" (46), an excellent formulation perfectly applicable to Oliver Stone's project.

While his peers attend the senior prom, Ron prepares for Boot Camp. The sequence begins with his narcissistic gaze into the mirror. Wearing his Mickey Mantle baseball cap, he appears uncertain of his future destiny. He prays to God, his Gethsemane dominated by Oliver Stone's overhead

camera. His parents watch General Westmoreland on television expressing his contempt for the Vietnamese. While Mr. Kovic expresses reservations, Mrs. Kovic enthusiastically supports Ron's enlistment. "You're doing the right thing. Communism has to be stopped. God wants it." Although Mrs. Kovic bears some degree of responsibility for supporting the status quo, the film one-sidedly directs its venom against her, not the political and social system responsible for such conditioning. For Oliver Stone, she represents a convenient scapegoat within a patriarchally manipulated cinematic construction. Ron rushes out in the rain to join Donna in one final dance in the senior prom gaining narcissistic reassurance under her gaze, as the band plays "Moon River," ominously foreshadowing another "River" in Vietnam.

After this last reunion, the image fades to black before moving on to Vietnam. Filmed in reddish hues, the sequence has visual overtones of male Gothic purgatorial subjectivity. Ron's involvement in the confused October 1967 Cuac Viet River village attack has traumatic consequences. The vertiginous, quasi-hallucinatory nature of this sequence presents it in visually melodramatic hysteric imagery emphasizing male crisis rather than condemnation of American atrocities. It functions in a particular de-politicized textual manner. As with most American representations of the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese people function as convenient backdrops for male agony, not as subjects in their own right. The massacre has ominous overtones. The camera obsessively dwells on mutilated female bodies inside a hut, one of which is a dead mother whose live baby Ron is forced to leave. Stone presents Ron's deranged behavior in such a manner as to intimate that he understands the massacre to result from his own repressed feelings against the maternal and feminine realm. He has mutilated a family and will thus have to undergo punishment. One grunt actually condemns Ron for this action as a "motherfucker." The sequence contains some interesting links to certain connotations within the horror genre. His retreat and accidental killing of Wilson also have significant associations. The name recalling Poe's *William Wilson*, this raw recruit hails from Venus, Georgia. During Ron's earlier attempt to ask Donna to the senior prom, Frankie Avalon's "Venus" appeared on the soundtrack. The last movement of the film sees Ron seeking family absolution, like Gypo Nolan in the closing movements of Ford's *The Informer* (1935), in Venus, Georgia. By killing Wilson, Ron really kills a figure representing both his dark surrogate scapegoat self as well as an *alter ego* who has achieved his failed goal of marital union. Wilson's death thus anticipates the demise of two aspects of Kovic's persona. Depicting the event through slow-motion, dream-like point-of-view imagery Stone strongly suggests dark Gothic connotations. He has committed a mortal sin against the family resulting in an unconscious death-wish.

Ron's punishment soon comes. The next combat sequence opens with a close-up of Ron's eyes. A grunt's comment emphasizes the metaphysical dimensions of the following event. "This must be hell. Purgatory." A black soldier replies, "Where's the motherfucking devil?" aptly




Born on the Fourth of July

expressing Ron's mental turmoil of guilt and incestuously rooted feelings of hatred towards his distant mother. Ron Kovic is "the motherfucking devil," bearing guilt for his earlier violent penetration of the village hut. As another attack ensues, Ron masochistically courts sacrificial martyrdom. Although he later tells Timmy that the John Wayne mystique resulted in continuing to fight rather than lie and wait for medical help, John Williams's extra-diegetic religious dirge reveals the real reason — masochistic desires for martyrdom rooted in his guilt in violating the maternal realm. We should not trust anything Ron Kovic says later. He also refers to anti-war demonstrators as "pansy" to Timmy, following the typical Reaganite Vietnam movie vilification of this important movement (see *Hamburger Hill*, *The Hanoi Hilton*, both 1987). Despite its superficial masquerade, *Born on the Fourth of July* is certainly not an anti-war movie. It is rather a conservative psychological male melodrama aiming to symbolically restore its hero to the Oedipal trajectory.

As Ron falls for the second time, the soundtrack reprises the sounds of his childhood friends from the long-off day

of 1950 in Sally's Wood — "You're dead Ronny!" The feminine realm gains its revenge. A black soldier finds Ron and bears him on his shoulders to safety. The Vietnam sequences end with Ron receiving the last rites, the image punctuating his now-literal castration with a rapid cut to black.

The Bronx Hospital sequence reveals Stone's ethnic sensibilities as being little different from D. W. Griffith's in *Birth of a Nation*. Presided over by black Nurse Washington's "Nurse Ratchet" figure, Stone represents the environment as dominated by uncaring and cynical blacks. Although one black orderly attempts to open Ron's eyes in an area where government cut-backs are clearly responsible for apathy and corruption, the overpowering imagery relies on racial stereotyping. We first see the orderlies neglecting their duties and gambling. Stone chooses to emphasize Kovic's melodramatic castration anxieties rather than explore these highly relevant social issues. Learning that he will never have children, Ron embarks on a futile physical training program. He falls and breaks his leg, the overhead camera again witnessing yet another castration.



The image abruptly cuts to black. We next see his face. But the camera moves back revealing Ron gazing at his own image. No longer a perfect male body narcissistically reveling in admiring female gazes, he is now a broken body gazing despondently at his own reflection. Another rapid cut to black follows the malfunctioning of his life-support machine.

Ron's return home represents a traumatic odyssey. On his arrival, family and neighbours either stare or attempt to deny their horror at his broken body. Ron bears "the lack." He visibly represents "the gaping wound," the female imagery of conservative Freudian interpretation. As neighbours silently stare in the background, a point-of-view shot of Ron's crotch from his brother Tommy's perspective reveals the source of morbid fascination. While Father greets Ron, Mrs. Kovic remains inside. Unlike the book where she does visit him in hospital, Stone's Mrs. Kovic harbors clear feelings of repugnance at a son upon whom she placed many hopes. He clearly now can not "bear any burden." Uncertain of her feelings, Mrs. Kovic does attempt to welcome her son. But she quickly rushes inside again leaving Mr. Kovic to help Ron, reprising his first appearance where he bore young Ron on his shoulders.

Within such a scenario, the conservative implications of the Lacanian discourse lend themselves readily to interpreting Ron's cinematic plight. Alone in his room Ron picks up a photo showing his former virile athletic self. Moving its angle slightly, his now-castrated reflection appears on the glass contrasting his former image. At Steve's Burger Bar, Ron experiences the first of many hostile female gazes. A waitress coldly looks at him. No longer is he the object of admiring female gazes. During the Fourth of July parade, lacking both penis and phallus, he becomes a public spectacle, abused by mostly female demonstrators who throw firecrackers at him. Aural extradiegetic signifiers of helicopter and crying baby prevent him addressing the audience.

Deciding to visit Donna, now an activist student at Syracuse, he finds her self-involved in her trendy activities and clearly unsympathetic to his personal dilemma. Although the film realistically avoids Hollywood clichés in not making her the stereotypical devoted female who will "cure" Ron, there is no objective evidence to believe Stone presents her in a positive light. Her student activism lacks any real depth and is clearly the result of contemporary fashion (as many former "activists" now admit). There is no clear evidence to suggest that "what happened to him is partly responsible for her own commitment to political activism, and...it is her guidance and encouragement that set him on the road to a similar commitment, acceptance of his condition, and the consequent recovery of a sense of dignity and self-worth" (Wood, 65-66). Immediately following scenes show Ron's bar-room debilitation and Mexican decline. They clearly reveal that Donna is *not* the major influence in Ron's recovery. It is, rather, Ron's encounter with the Wilson family and his reincorporation into Stone's patriarchal world. We see no real evidence of Donna's "guidance and encouragement."

As Temple University Press editor Janet Francondese insightfully notes, "This woman, in a key scene, is so intent on organizing a demonstration that she is completely oblivious to the man, his disability, and his openness to changing his political views. Part of the point about his disability is that it infantilizes him and that point can't be made if he has a 'girlfriend.'" ⁵ In Mexico, Maria Elena actually descends the stairs to meet Ron, not ascend and glance guiltily back at him as Donna does. The student demonstration actually begins with Ron holding Donna's hand in front of her student boyfriend like a lost infant. He is still "castrated," the sequence ending with another significant cut to black.

Donna plays no part in Ron's development. The next sequence presents him as an irritating bum showing off in a local bar to Jenny, a young girl, whose gaze he narcissistically attempts attracting, before his wheelchair collapses on the floor. An overhead camera shot reveals the disco lights fragmenting his image undercutting his drunken masculine masquerade. The role of the gaze is extremely significant in any examination of *Born on the Fourth of July*.

His return home represents a major transitional point. Awakening his family Ron begins a drunken tirade, attacking his mother's cherished ideological icons of God, Country, and Patriotism. This sequence is excessively virulent, alerting the viewer to the film's real emotional weight. It displaces the radical nature of the original source material in a misogynistic direction. Although Mrs. Kovic is clearly wrong and mistaken, Stone does not present her as a victim of the dominant ideology. He instead, dishonestly, makes her his "Queen of Evil." Ron blames her for sending him to Vietnam. "You told me to go!" "I didn't force you to go!" "Yes, you did!" Emotionally abusing her by uttering taboo words which her social conditioning makes her reluctant to hear, "Big fucking penis," Ron Kovic commits an act of verbal rape on his hated mother. Oliver Stone can now expel Mrs. Kovic from the text. Like Donna, she has served *his* purpose.

Ron's generic melodramatically weak but sympathetic father suggests he travel to Mexico. A cut to black does not end this sequence. Instead, Stone suggests the potential existing in this movement by a fade. After all, "Father Knows Best." However, the Mexican adventure represents another odyssey to an inferno region presenting another trial for Ron Kovic. The sequence evokes Vietnam. It opens with red-filter dissolves of the Mexican landscape. ⁶ But this time Ron will finally begin to leave his personal Purgatory.

Dominated by Charlie from Chicago (Willem Dafoe), Villa Dulce's quasi-Peckinpah world of "limp dicks" presents another possibility for Ron. He has his first sexual

5. Observations made during drafts of an essay, "Mythic Patterns and Narrative Trajectories in mid-80s Vietnam Movies," which finally appeared in *Inventing Vietnam*, Ed. Michael Anderegg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 114-139.

6. This is not a "flashback to the pink sky and dunes along the beach where Kovic unintentionally helped murder women and children and accidentally shot Corporal Wilson" (17) as Kunz believes. However, the color filter does suggest these associations.

experience, taking up Maria Elena's (Cordelia Gonzales) motherly offer. A shot reveals him weeping like a child as Maria orgasmically reacts to his touch. Emotionally overjoyed, he is now beginning his own form of Oedipal trajectory. But, as Freud shows, the child can not possess or marry the mother. Ron buys her a gift. Descending the stairs with another client, she knowingly understands the nature of his desires, smiling complicitly, "We get married?...Yes?" Ron and the audience also know the answer. Having served her purpose, Maria Elena now leaves the narrative.

The next shot reveals Ron's Oedipal progress. As the camera tracks outside the whorehouse, we see, from Ron's perspective, an array of willing hookers. Women no longer gaze at him in hostility but display their bodies to him as objects for the male gaze. In a film like this Mulvey's law is appropriate. However, after his (unseen) sexual experience, he awakes with nightmares of Vietnam showing his shooting of Wilson and the mutilated bodies of predominantly female family members. He has further stages to reach: reincorporation within the patriarchal family order is one of them.

Breaking with another potential *alter ego*, he engages in a futile fight with Charlie. Before their rescue by a "good Samaritan," Ron speaks of his lost Edenic, familiar pre-Vietnam world, bringing tears to the cheeks of his dissolute companion. "Did you have a father and mother...things that made sense before we all got lost?" He now decides to return to another family — the Wilsons — as their dark prodigal son.

Ron's deep link with Wilson visually appears as he visits the grave. A high angle point-of-view zoom-in to the headstone alternates with a low-angle zoom-back to Ron in his wheelchair. It is almost as if the dead Wilson is watching him. Ron must expel his personal demon. Arriving at the Wilson home, he sees Jamie Wilson (Lili Taylor) coldly watching him from inside, her hostile gaze representing the last traumatic hurdle Ron must encounter before his final entry into the Symbolic Realm. He then confesses his guilt before Mr. and Mrs. Wilson. Jamie's small son ironically plays with a war toy as young Ron once did. An uncomfortable silence ensues. Unlike Mrs. Kovic, Mrs. Wilson accepts the past, a "good" mother counterbalancing Ron's "bad" mother. "What's done is done, sir." Jamie's attitude is naturally more ambiguous. "I can't ever forgive you, sir. But maybe the Lord can." Mrs. Wilson grants Ron his final absolution. Unlike Mrs. Kovic who earlier pronounced, "God is going to punish you for this," she comfortingly utters, "We understand the pain you've been through." Like Gypo Nolan, Ron is forgiven.

The sequence ends with the camera craning up a tree. But this time the movement is not threatening. It symbolizes Ron's reintegration within the Symbolic and Political Order. The worlds of Nature and the Feminine Maternal Realm no longer threaten him. As the sound mixes to "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," Ron leads the Vietnam Veterans Against the War in a populist demonstration against the 1972 Republican Convention. The

image dissolves to a shot of the American flag before dollying to reveal Ron bearing another flag, its base placed prominently against his crotch. The "Yankee Doodle Boy" begins his return home, bearing the Phallus as a symbolic substitute for the missing penis.

Ron leads a revolt more populist than radical against a bad Father. Video images of Nixon present him as Stone's equivalent of Capra's corrupt capitalists such as Douglas Dumbrille, Claude Rains, and Edward Arnold, a figure exclusively responsible for American ills. Ron conducts a military campaign using strategy little different from Vietnam. The demonstration actually does not represent any progressive movement. Despite Ron's condemnation of the war, the visual emphasis (using screen and video imagery) is on Ron as the heroic object of the audience's gaze in a film whose level of political sophistication presents the most banal parody of Levi-Strauss' binary oppositions. Bad leader Richard Nixon now occupies the throne of fallen good leader J.F.K. The Republic Party are the bad guys to Oliver Stone's view of the Democrats as "good guys." No mention is ever made of the Democratic Party's culpability for the Vietnam War. But after all, *Born on the Fourth of July's* rigid use of binary oppositions is understandable in terms of its formal generic family-melodramatic operations.

Although Ron is arrested during his military campaign, a black veteran aids him, lifting him on his shoulders, as the other black "grunt" did in Vietnam. Like females, he immediately disappears from the narrative having served Oliver Stone's purpose thus reversing the negative images of the Bronx Hospital's "bad" blacks. After all, unlike the radical black orderly, he is as John Ford would say in *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* — "Army" and, despite his color, "one of us" for Oliver Stone.

Among those surrounding Ron as he plans his next campaign is his new girlfriend suitably clad in a military jacket. Possibly representing the Connie Panzarino whom Ron Kovic romantically acknowledges in the original *Born on the Fourth of July*, she is both silent and gazing at Ron in admiration. Ron has now regained his former position as object of the admiring female gaze. She briefly reappears in the film's final sequence, the 1976 Democratic Convention, among a bevy of others.

However, the Miami military campaign sequence ends abruptly with an overhead shot abruptly cutting to black in the manner of those other scenes illustrating Ron's humiliation. There appears no real reason for this unless we regard the text as malfunctioning in its inability to bear the excessive weight of Stone's construction. It symptomatically protests, thus undercutting any positive interpretations to Ron's regeneration.

The film moves towards its conclusion. Ron is guest speaker at the Democratic Convention. As he wheels towards the auditorium a flurry of admiring female faces and cameras follow him on his journey. Autographing a copy of his book, Ron basks in adoring female gazes. Ron is now a hero, a Yankee Doodle Boy. A series of quick flashbacks follows. Mrs. Kovic appears once more with her



Born on the Fourth of July: TomCruise and Kyra Sedgwick.

prophecy, "I had a dream. You were speaking to a crowd and you were saying great things." We see again young Ron's former achievements such as his baseball strike and final high school dance with Donna as he sought the dubious comforts of female reassurance. As the band strikes up Cohen's "It's A Grand Old Flag," Ron exclaims, "I feel at home. Maybe I'm home."

Surrounded by these admiring gazes, one wonders about his real motives. As Janet Francondese perceptively notes, "Was it for female approval that he became involved in the vet protest against the war?" Also, is not re-investment of a narcissistic male ego the real basis of the film, not radicalism? The final shot shows Ron wheeling towards the podium as the image fades to white, reversing the previous abrupt cuts to black enunciating his earlier experiences of male humiliation. He is now symbolically restored to both the Law of the Father and its family association.

PHALLIC PANIC AND MELODRAMATIC RESOLUTION

To understand *Born on the Fourth of July*'s non-radical structure means engaging in a meticulous analysis. In this sense, "The Life of a Film is in Its Detail." Responsible use of contemporary analytic tools are thus essential to avoid falling for Stone's manipulations.

Born on the Fourth of July is primarily a text of male hysteria operating in a conservative, not radical, dimension. As a Hollywood production made in a conservative era attempting to rewrite Vietnam, as the Gulf War did, it would never have appeared on the screen without the use of key recuperative devices, chief of which is the Reagan Era's use of the Oedipal Trajectory. *Born on the Fourth of July* de-emphasizes the Vietnam Conflict to present an image of male trauma and eventual conservative resolution. Its excessive visual style marks it as a text of phallic panic. As Barbara Creed (1990) states elsewhere in examining another male hysteric text, "The male subject's narcissistic investment in representations of himself points to an important connection between castration anxiety and the process of duplication." (133). This helps us to understand a film containing several duplicating male (Wilson, Charlie) and female figures (Mrs. Kovic, Donna, Jenny, Maria Elena, Ron's Miami girlfriend, and the many Democratic Convention females with the same admiring gazes).

Oliver Stone's use of one of the most narcissistically self-conscious stars in contemporary Hollywood cinema is not accidental. *Born on the Fourth of July* is really a text of castration anxiety in which the Cruise persona plays a significant role. Cruise plays a figure not too far removed from his own contemporary status: a pretty boy needing female approval — especially at the box office! Stone destroys this persona only to construct it again. The narcissistic

dimension plays a key structuring role in the film very relevant to Stone's construction of Mrs. Kovic as a castrating maternal bitch. Freud understood castration as originating in the male's fear at the sight of the female genitals influencing construction of "woman as a being who frightens and expels because she is castrated." Male hysteria results when the hysteric displaces his fear of castration on to the woman's body, "the text in which we read signs of male hysteria" (Creed, 133). The woman's body thus becomes an object of terror for the male eventually falling into Julia Kristeva's definition of the "abject." Thus, Ron's discovery of the mutilated female bodies after the Cuac Viet River attack results in his traumatic fear of castration, not rational guilt concerning his involvement in a military atrocity. His superior officer will not listen to his confession like an understanding father. Only the Wilson family will grant him absolution. The incident evokes in Ron fear of the "lack," a deep-rooted psychological guilt for harming the mother figure. To finally disavow this lack, Ron must damn a mother whom the film blames both for supporting the Vietnam War and instilling in her son castration anxiety. It is this, not Donna's supposed radical influence, that represents the main direction of the film. His attack on Mother represents a particular patriarchal defensive operation admirably described by Kaja Silverman (1988):

"Through its endless renarrativization of the castration crisis, it transfers to the female subject the losses which afflict the male subject. It also arms him against the possible return of these losses by orchestrating a range of defensive operations to be used against the image of woman, from disavowal and fetishism to voyeurism and sadism. In this way the trauma which would otherwise capsize the male viewer is both elicited and contained" (31).

Stone's treatment of Mrs. Kovic is certainly both visually and verbally sadistic.

There is also a pertinent reason for the film's almost obsessive concentration on the narcissistic dimension. According to Freud's 1914 essay, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," the condition does have a particular social dimension. Freud notes that the parental compulsion to ascribe unrealistic attributes of perfection to the child often stems from the parents' revival and reproduction of their own narcissism which they have long since abandoned. Stone presents mother as the dominant parent often idealizing Ron and chastizing Tommy. "The child shall have a better time than his parents; he shall not be subject to the necessities which they have recognized as paramount in life...The child shall fulfill those wishful dreams of the parents which they have never carried out — the boy shall become a great man in his father's place." (85). Freud also notes that substitutes for the mother may also provide gratification for the child's narcissistic impulses (50). This naturally influences Ron's desires to bask approvingly in the female gaze.

Mrs. Kovic sees Ron as another J.F.K., a goal realized at the film's climax when Ron also fulfills Charlie's axiom, "If you haven't got it in the hips you'd better have it in the lips." After her literal expulsion from the film, Stone restores Mrs. Kovic to act as a disembodied conservative oracle affirming her son's re-embodied entry into both the Symbolic Order and the American Body Politic. We have no evidence as to what Ron actually says at the Convention. He will certainly not denounce Phallus worship since the whole film is based on it. Kaja Silverman's description of the acoustic mirror is a much more appropriate understanding of Mrs. Kovic's final appearance. The acoustic mirror is always performed exclusively for the male subject's benefit.

"The maternal voice is thus complexly bound up in that drama which 'decisively projects the formation of the individual into history,' and whose 'internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation.' Indeed, it would seem to be the maternal rather than the paternal voice that initially constitutes the auditory sphere for most children, although it is clearly the latter which comes to predominate in the superego" (100).

Ron Kovic enters the history of a Democratic Party divested of its responsibility for the Vietnam War and returns home to the patriarchal fold. Stone is blind to the forces within American culture making Mrs. Kovic an ideological victim and chooses instead to make her the film's monster. The feminist psychoanalytical "object relations" school does, fortunately, provide an alternative perspective by which we may understand the historical forces influencing Stone's construction. According to Nancy Chodorow (1978), narcissism results from secondary socially influenced factors, not primary instinctual ones. Oppressed within a patriarchal society which rigidly defines gender, the mother may over-emotionally invest her desires for status in her son who also excessively emphasizes his particular sense of difference (104-105). Chodorow's recent work (1989) contains relevant criticisms against the fantasy of the perfect, all-powerful, devouring mother. Noting the common tendency of blaming the mother, she notes that critics "ignore any conditions that determine or foster maternal behavior in the first place and accept a completely deterministic view of child development" (89). She traces this to the American culture's fear of the feminine. Referring to some relevant research findings Chodorow comments that problematic marital relationships may result in a situation whereby women resentful of their unequal social status may compensate for this by exercising arbitrary and great power in the household, particularly over male children" (227-228). A son's sense of self becomes dependent upon his mother's arbitrary whim, thus making it difficult for male children to either assert themselves or create different male identities.⁷ Chodorow's work thus reveals some pertinent social factors lying behind Mrs. Kovic's condition. However, rather than presenting her as an equal victim within the social

structure, Stone tends to make her a convenient monster within a conservatively orientated male melodrama.

Born on the Fourth of July is certainly no radical film, to say the least. No director who uses women as convenient scapegoats or subordinate props for his male character's excessive egos deserves any such acclaim.

THE DOORS AND J.F.K.

By way of conclusion I wish to make some summary remarks about Stone's succeeding works. Both films, especially *J.F.K.*, deserve (and will undoubtedly receive further) analysis. I see little in them to reverse my judgements concerning Stone's supposed progressive status. Indeed, both films confirm them, the most recent containing features designating him as the most dangerous and irresponsible director working in Hollywood today.

The Doors continues Stone's explorations in hysterical male melodrama. As the *Jump Cut* editorial board noticed, it is the perfect text for any dismissive right-wing characterization of the 60s as an excessive era of dope, drugs, and drunken exhibitionism. The opening sequence again presents Mother as Stone's convenient scapegoat for his hero's trauma. Travelling through New Mexico, she wakes Jim up from his sleep, "Look at the clouds. The clouds are beautiful." Then, when he sees the violent road accident resulting in Stone's archetypal Melvillian "exchange of looks" between Jim and the dying Indian, she acts as a repressive agent denying the reality of the scene, "Don't look Jim. It's all right. It's just a dream. It's nothing but a dream."

Thanks to mother, Jim's dream becomes an Oedipal nightmare. Again we note Stone's binary oppositional schizophrenic view of women: maternally good Pam and bad, witch-like Patricia. Native Americans also function as convenient, picturesque "Other" figures within this male traumatic representation. Perhaps the most appalling episode in the film is Jim's visit to the New York Underground Society. It is a world in whose then contemporary challenge to the status quo Stone sees no real validity. Not only is Andy Warhol represented by Crispin Glover's clichéd, effeminate mincing gay stereotype but The Velvet Underground's Nico becomes reduced to the level of an archetypal slut. While I have no knowledge of Nico's personal life, then and after, I do remember seeing her on several occasions in Manchester (U.K.) long after her superstar status. On one instance she gave a sincere, professional performance in a nightclub whose technical facilities left much to be desired. Unlike other singers, there were no tantrums. She went and simply gave a dedicated rendering of her past and present work. Stone's depiction of her in this film has nothing to do with "artistic authenticity." It is merely the cinematic fantasy of a coward who has clearly chosen the right targets. Now

deceased, both Warhol and Nico are not around to take the appropriate legal action concerning their appalling cinematic trashing.

Although *J.F.K.* has recently served as an important act of political consciousness-raising and naturally needs more space than I have at present, it too, has its negative overtones. The "conspiracy theory" is a formal device lending itself to usage by the right as well as the left. Several scholars have noted *J.F.K.*'s similarity to Leni Riefenstahl's emotional propaganda devices in *Triumph of the Will*. Slain leaders, whether Horst Wessel or Kirov, often lend themselves to propagandist misappropriation. The same is true of John F. Kennedy, one of the most emotionally venerated, but dubious figures the American political system has ever produced. Stone presents Kennedy as an idealized father-figure in a text more notable for its convenient factual omissions than anything else.⁸ *J.F.K.* is another of Stone's tedious Oedipal fantasies. The opening documentary footage presents *J.F.K.* as "family man," illustrating Stone's typical bias once again. He yearns for the restoration of old family values as well as their political counterparts. Ignoring Kennedy's McCarthyite associations, his clear responsibility for the Vietnam debacle (as any reading of the second volume of *The Pentagon Papers* shows),⁹ his lack of any initiative towards Civil Rights and Welfare Reforms (all achieved later by "bad" father L.B.J.), Stone appears irresponsibly uncritical towards a figure whose Camelot ideal actually foreshadowed the political conmanship of Ronald Reagan several decades later. Tediously excessive, the film moves towards its final Capraesque moment with Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) noticeably unable to achieve James Stewart's moral victory in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) against Tommy Lee Jones's white-haired Claude Rains reincarnation. The film's most revealing moment lies in Garrison's final appeal to the jury where Stone's conservative sympathies finally reveal themselves in the best manner of any Freudian slip.

Basking in the gaze of his own son (played by Sean Stone — one can imagine Olly saying "Look at Daddy!" behind the camera), Garrison delivers his final speech. As well as representing the most unconvincing prosecution ever delivered in court (and rightly ignored by the jury), Stone's real right-wing patriarchal sympathies finally emerge. Beginning by speaking of a democratic government and Constitution, Garrison moves into purple hyperbolic planes evoking both *Hamlet* ("children of a slain father/leader whose killers still possess the throne") and Tennyson ("authority forgets a dying king"), as well as religion (the plot is "as old as the crucifixion"). He calls to the jury, "Do not forget your dying king." Although he concludes, "Show the world this is still a government of the people, for the people, and by the people," the contradiction is telling. Garrison veers away from Jeffersonian democratic ideals, emphasizing instead the very monarchic institution the American Revolution was designed to overthrow. Viewing the American people as (naturally male) *Hamlets* bereft of their king, both Garrison and Oliver Stone show where their real sympathies lie — with

the conservative Federalist movement (associated with Adams and Hamilton) to destroy democracy and restore the monarchy. This is as clear an indication of Oliver Stone's right-wing patriarchal sympathies as we are ever likely to see. The mask has dropped.

The work of Oliver Stone reflects negative sentiments still present within the American cultural tradition today. His films represent devious masquerades, acts of cinematic conmanship, needing urgent confrontation and appropriate dismissal. Although we all hope for a better Hollywood and the emergence of oppositional directors, both the current cinematic establishment and Oliver Stone are poles removed from this ideal. Perhaps, as Tina Turner stated, we should all recognize that we don't need another hero, certainly not a false idol. There are other more appropriate movements more worthy of cinematic attention — those existing outside Hollywood. At the end of his important work, *A Rumor of War*, Vietnam veteran Philip Caputo urged his readers to be wary of "political witch-doctors such as John F. Kennedy." The same is also true of his cinematic "Confidence Man" counterpart — Oliver Stone.

7. I am grateful to Kathleen Ensor for pointing out this reference. The relevant texts Chodorow cites are Philip and Dori A. Slater, "Maternal ambivalence and narcissism: a cross cultural study," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly of Behavior and Development* 11 (1965): 243; and Beatrice B. Whiting, "Sex identity, conflict and physical violence: a comparative study," *American Anthropologist* 67 (1967): 123-140. For alternative socially-orientated psychoanalytic theories opposing Oliver Stone's instinctual individualistic representations see also Jessica Benjamin, "Authority and the family revisited: or a world without fathers?" *New German Critique* 13 (1978): 35-57; "The Oedipal riddle, authority, autonomy and the new narcissism," *The Problem of Authority in America*, Eds. John Diggins and Mark Kamm (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 195-241.

8. For some popular, but interesting, journalistic responses concerning *J.F.K.* see Richard Corliss, "Who Killed J.F.K.?" / Lance Morrow and Martha Smilgis, "Plunging into the Labyrinth," *Time* (December 23, 1991): 66-70; 74-76; Jennet Conant, "The Man Who Shot J.F.K." *G.Q.* 62.1 (January 1992): 61-67, 137-139; Nicholas Lemann, "The Case Against Jim Garrison," *op. cit.* 68-75 (especially for Robert Kennedy's 1964 admission that J.F.K. believed in the Vietnam involvement as "worthwhile" [75]); Oliver Stone, "Oliver Stone Talks Back," *Premiere* 5.5 (January 1992): 66-72; Brian Case, "The Men Who Shot JFK," *Time Out* (Jan. 8-15 1992): 14-18; and Norman Mailer, "Footfalls in the Crypt," *Vanity Fair* 55.2 (February 1992): 76-81, 109-109. If any doubt remains over Stone's attitude to his own mother influencing his depiction of women, note his defensive reaction and comment in the Conant article in describing her as "a big white-liar, she was white-lying all the time" (138).

9. For further evidence of the corruption within the Kennedy administration see Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1982); Loren Baritz, *Backfire* (New York: Ballantine, 1985), 89-131; and George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: the United States and Vietnam 1950-1975*, second edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 73-107.

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- . "Radicalism and Popular Cinema: The Films of Oliver Stone." *cineACTION* 23 (Winter 1990-1991): 60-69.

EDITORIAL COMMENT

It is my policy not to intervene in work I choose for publication even when I disagree with some of its content; but in the present instance I feel some commentary is necessary.

Tony's article seems to me to imply, fairly clearly, that *CineAction's* writers work from purely 'personal response', with little or no theoretical grounding. (Why, by the way, does 'theory' always seem to mean other people's theories, never one's own?). On behalf of myself and my colleagues I wish to repudiate this suggestion as vehemently as possible. Some of us have indeed tried to acknowledge — and accept, and even celebrate — the inescapable presence of the 'personal' in all critical writing, as against the (explicit or implicit) claims of certain theorists to a 'scientific' truth. Let me put it like this: personal experience is necessarily narrow, subjective and biased. All theories have their roots in personal experience, yet almost invariably fail to acknowledge this. That is why all theories should be distrusted, however useful they may be.

I also feel that anyone who has not read my article on Stone (*CineAction* 23) will take away from Tony's remarks the impression that I claim Stone's work as embodying an uncompromised radicalism. Anyone who has read it will know that this is far from the case. The purpose of my article was to examine Stone's films in relation to the possibility of a radical popular cinema: a possibility that at present does not and cannot exist (the 'bottom line' of Hollywood is and always has been not ideology but economics: when radicalism becomes popular, Hollywood will produce radical movies). My major stress was on the fundamental blockage of thought (in the work not only of Stone but of all other would-be leftist filmmakers working within the Hollywood system) that has consistently compromised his work.

Perhaps, having said so much, I should go on to say that I find Tony's article extremely stimulating, provocative, and sometimes brilliant. To the question 'This is so, isn't it?' I would wish to reply with roughly as many 'Nos' as 'Yes, buts...' As the question itself has (to judge from the quotation from Anthony Easthope which appears to have Tony's unqualified endorsement) now been officially vetoed, it is perhaps necessary to add that any criticism that doesn't imply it is by definition totalitarian. I think Tony offers a valid reading of *Born on the 4th of July*. But I also think that other readings — and, perhaps more important, other attitudes — are equally valid. To develop this would require a whole new article, which I am not at present prepared to write. I will say only that I don't (after carefully considering both the article and Brad Stevens' letter in *Cineaction* 28) regard Stone's film as monolithically reactionary, and neither can I regard with such unqualified hostility the 'populist' tradition as represented by Ford, Capra and (perhaps especially) McCarey. Things are not so simple...

Robin Wood

While the City Sleeps

by Michael Walker

Although *While the City Sleeps* (1956) is probably one of Fritz Lang's most generally admired films, it has not engendered much serious critical discussion. Laurie Clancy's 1978 reading of the film¹ makes a number of valid and perceptive points, but stops short of teasing out the film's more remarkable qualities. Ann Kaplan's 1980 article² interestingly relates the film to its social context, but is otherwise highly unreliable: almost every time she refers to a detail in the film, she gets it wrong. More seriously, in his 1966 article – translated and reprinted in Stephen Jenkins' 1981 book on Lang³ – Raymond Bellour refers to certain moments in *While the City Sleeps* in detail, and repeatedly misdescribes what actually happens on the screen. In his first two (p 31)



and fourth pp 34/35) examples, Bellour is simply wrong: the shots are not as he says. (Of course, it is possible that a differently edited version of the film exists in France, but I doubt it.) In the other two examples (pp 31 and 35), both dealing with scenes set in 'The Dell' (the bar the employees of Kyne Enterprises regularly patronise), he is more or less accurate about the shots but, I would argue, imputes to the narrative an ambiguity which he is busy inventing. Far from the 'ambiguity' and 'hesitation' Bellour finds in the film, I would argue that Lang's concern in *While the City Sleeps* is to film each moment for 'expressive lucidity.' His *découpage* is designed to present the events in a way which, whilst not disturbing the conventions of 'Classical Hollywood



'The Dell': Dana Andrews, Sally Forrest, Thomas Mitchell and Ida Lupino in *While the City Sleeps*

Cinema,' invites an *analytical* attention: there is a precision and rigour that is constantly in evidence. I will return to this later and, using one of Bellour's own examples, discuss what I consider are the implications of the way Lang films the sequence.

While the City Sleeps was set up by producer Bert Friedlob for his own company, Teleradio Pictures. He acquired the property — a 1953 novel by Charles Einstein, *The Bloody Spur* — commissioned Casey Robinson to produce a screenplay and Lang to direct. RKO took over and distributed the finished film. As I have already mentioned in discussing *Kings Row*,⁴ Robinson was one of Hollywood's finest screenwriters, and he and Lang worked together to produce a script

each was happy with. During the scripting, the parts were cast, and so the roles were inflected to suit the particular actors. (Laurie Clancy says that, according to Robinson, Ed Mobley's excessive drinking was in fact incorporated to accommodate Dana Andrews' own drinking.) Although

1. Laurie Clancy: "Director and Screenwriter" in *The Australian Journal of Screen Theory* 4 (1978).

2. Ann Kaplan: "Patterns of Violence towards Women in Fritz Lang's *While the City Sleeps*" in *Wide Angle* Vol 3 No 4 (1980).

3. Raymond Bellour: "On Fritz Lang," first published in *Critique* No 226 (March 1966), translated and reprinted in Stephen Jenkins: *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look* (BFI, 1981).

4. Michael Walker: *Kings Row* in *CineAction!* 26/27 (Winter 1992).

none of the actors was a big star, no less than nine were middle-ranking stars or distinguished character-actors, a casting coup that was possible "because the script was written so that with good planning, each star had no more than four or five days shooting. Therefore it was possible — simply from a financial standpoint — to put many stars in it; and every part was good."⁵

While *the City Sleeps* has two major narrative strands — the hunt for a serial killer and a power struggle within a media communications empire — which are woven together at a number of levels. At the first level, the film is a superb example of classic Hollywood filmmaking. Through brilliant scripting, each scene both carries the separate threads of the narrative forward and sets up parallels and contrasts between the characters. Typically of Lang's late Hollywood works, the film combines the density of detail with economy of exposition — as a consequence, each moment is packed with meaning. Less typically of Lang's films, the characters and performances are almost all extremely vivid — the film contains literally dozens of telling details in performance, gesture, dress and speech. The film's 'classic qualities' may be illustrated by briefly sketching in the opening sequences.

The film begins with the killer. A pre-credit sequence (most unusual at the time) shows Robert Manners (John Barrymore Jr) delivering a drugstore package and being aroused — very like Beckert (Peter Lorre) in *M* (1930) — by the shadow of a young woman as she's about to take a bath. He waits for the departure of the janitor Pilski (Vladimir Sokoloff) — who has been attending to a problem with the plumbing: the woman, Judith Felton (Sandy White), calls him 'Pop' — and then contrives to enter the apartment by returning on a pretext and desnibbing the lock. The sequence ends with a rapid dolly in to Judith's screaming face, so that the black-out for the murder becomes the black-out for the credits. After the credits, we see Judith's bathrobe (all she'd been wearing) lying on the floor; Lang then tilts up to a police photographer and dollies forward, as the man moves aside, to reveal a scrawl on the wall behind him saying 'Ask mother.' A dissolve then superimposes this message in close-up over the exterior of the Kyne Building. Inside, Ed Mobley (Andrews) is being made up: as Kyne TV's star presenter, he's due on the air in fifteen minutes. In this fifteen minutes diegetic time (six minutes screen time) we are then introduced to six more of the film's main characters in a brilliantly succinct sequence which ends with the death of Amos Kyne (Robert Warwick), the founder and owner of the empire. The other characters, like Ed, all work for him: they are Mark Loving (George Sanders), head of Kyne News Service; Mark's secretary, Nancy Liggett (Sally Forrest), who is Ed's girlfriend; Mildred Donner (Ida Lupino), woman's columnist, who is Mark's girlfriend; Jon Day Griffith (Thomas Mitchell), editor of the *New York Sentinel*, and Harry Kritzer (James Craig), head of Kyne Pix. In each case, but particularly with Andrews, Lupino, Sanders and Mitchell, the match between casting and part is perfect.

Part of the skill of this sequence is the economy with which it gives us insight into the characters. As he's being

made up, Ed phones Nancy to make a date and unnerves her by referring to the way Mark is 'purring' over her shoulder as he dictates (although Mark has a separate office, Ed can see them through the glass). But, immediately afterwards, Mildred stops at Ed's desk on her way out of the office and the two of them flirt with one another. As the film repeatedly shows — later, Mildred almost succeeds in seducing Ed — Ed and Mildred readily adopt the same (sexually) bantering language, and one of the questions raised by this is why does Ed prefer the virginal Nancy? However, Nancy's role as the film's 'good woman' — in opposition to Mildred as the 'sexual woman' — is also undermined from the beginning. She reveals her prissiness in her response to Ed on the phone: 'Shut your obscene face!'

Mark is introduced busy promoting his News Service ('ever on the alert'), but he simultaneously acts in the manner typical of a boss conscious of his power over his secretary, mentioning that he would prefer it if 'these walls were not made out of glass' and putting his arm round Nancy's shoulders. Harry is caught having just come in — implicitly from a rendezvous other than work. Not only do we never see him on the job, but we never even see him dealing with any of his photographers. Jon is introduced in a way which contrasts him with Mark and Harry. As senior executives, each of them has a separate office with his name on the door but, unlike the other two, Jon does not work in his. His secretary works in there, whilst Jon — presumably because he prefers to be close to his newspaper staff — has a desk in the open plan office. This links him with Ed — whose desk is also in the open plan office — as against the more elitist Mark and Harry.

In Amos's case, we see he is the sort of business tycoon who, even though he is bedridden and requires a nurse in constant attendance (he has a weak heart), has moved his bed into the office to carry on running his empire: literally, until he drops dead. It is he who sets up the link between the opening murder and the activities of Kyne Enterprises — and so connects the film's two main narrative strands. He reads a teleprinter report of the murder, and calls in the three senior executives and Ed. He seizes on the fact that the words 'Ask mother' were written in lipstick to label the murderer 'the lipstick killer,' and he wants the case played up: 'Smack across the front page.' His motives are typical of a tabloid proprietor: he wants every woman who uses lipstick 'to be scared silly every time she puts any on.' In *M*, Lang showed fear of the child murderer spreading through the city by focusing on the ordinary peoples' reactions: it was their suspicions and paranoia which fuelled the fear. Here he focuses on those who use the activities of a serial killer to make money: to sell newspapers, increase TV viewing figures, even make business deals, as happens later when the newswire report Mark sends out about Ed's telecast which taunts the killer is so 'sensational' it wins Mark a midwest service contract.

After Amos has given his instructions to the three executives, he is left alone with Ed. Knowing he could die at any

5. Peter Bogdanovich: *Fritz Lang in America* (Studio Vista, 1967).



Walter Kyne (Vincent Price) outlines his plan to find an executive director to Ed Mobley



Dorothy Kyne (Rhonda Fleming) phones her husband to praise her lover, Harry Kritzer's artwork on 'The Sentinel'

Dorothy and Walter in the exercise room. She's arranging to go and see Harry and is being nice to Walter for his gullibility.



time, he reveals his fears for the future of the empire which has taken him 'a lifetime of brains and guts to build up.' He knows he made a mistake with his son Walter — 'I killed him with kindness: polo ponies, yachts, women; especially the women he married' — and regrets that Ed, a surrogate son, has shown no interest in becoming his successor. When Ed says that he's content to be able to write a book now and then (he's a Pulitzer Prize winner) and he has no appetite for power, Amos protests, saying that it's more than power. He launches into a speech about the responsibility of the press to the people, but is cut short by a heart attack. Given the cynical way he set out to exploit women's fears about the killer, this looks like the film's revenge. From the beginning, then, the patriarch is problematised, and this becomes a significant thematic element during the film.

In the next scene — the morning after Amos's death — we are introduced to Walter (Vincent Price) in another scene

in Amos's study. The scenes are closely paralleled: once more the three executives are summoned for a brief interview; once more a separate scene with Ed follows. But, whereas Amos was authoritative and brusque, Walter — still in his evening clothes from the night before — is uncertain and defensive. When he reveals to Mark and Jon the extent of his ignorance about the company ('just what do you do around here?'), they exchange an amused glance; when Ed enters, Walter is not comfortable until Ed is sitting and he is standing over him. Nevertheless, in this scene, we hear Walter's side of the story: he resents the way his father always held Ed up as an example, and the fact that Amos never taught him the business. But he recognises his limitations as Amos's successor and has decided to solve the problem that he has no idea how to run the empire by appointing an 'executive director' of the company: 'Someone to do the actual work.' The power struggle for

that post — between Mark, Jon and Harry — and the hunt for the killer are then woven together more tightly: Walter intimates that whichever of the three finds the killer will win the post.

Generically, this makes the film a highly unusual blend of crime thriller, newspaper story and 'big business' melodrama. It is a crime thriller insofar as it deals with the hunt for the killer. Ed, who used to be a crime reporter, agrees to help Jon in the race for the post, and to this end he joins forces with police lieutenant Burt Kaufman (Howard Duff), an old friend who is in charge of the investigation. It is a newspaper story in its uses of newspaper themes and motifs to promote the hunt: the tag 'lipstick killer,' Ed's investigative journalism, the series of front pages which echo through the narrative, the quest for the scoop, Jon's surreptitious printing of the 'extra,' etc. And it is a 'big business' melodrama in the power struggle between the three rivals for the coveted post. But, whereas Mark and Jon compete with one another in exactly the manner Walter expects, Harry — an old friend of Walter's — quietly pursues his own route to the post through an affair with Walter's wife Dorothy (Rhonda Fleming).

A final point about the skill of the film's narrative construction is the extent to which we can keep track of where the main characters are at any given moment. In part, this arises from the fact that, once the competition for the post has been set in motion, the main characters are so suspicious of one another that they themselves are keeping track. (There are around twenty phone calls between the main characters during the course of the film.) But sometimes it goes beyond this, suggesting very precise plotting. After the opening sequences, the action moves forward a few days to Monday evening, and — apart from the honeymoon coda on Thursday morning — the remainder of the narrative takes place over the next 48 hours. Early on the Monday evening, Mark watches from his office whilst Jon chats to Gerald Meade (Ralph Peters), the crime reporter. (The glass walls to the offices help sustain the paranoid atmosphere: characters are forever spying on one another.) Mildred points out to Mark that, since finding the killer is the big thing, Jon would naturally want Meade on his side: she suggests that Mark make his own approach to Meade. Mark is uncertain. 'How can I be sure of him? Do I sleep with him?' Presumably the film only got away with this suggestion because it was perceived as a joke (Meade is in his fifties and rather sleazy) but, around 3 a.m. the next morning, Ed phones the switchboard operator at Kyne Enterprises and enlivens her shift by telling her to find Meade: 'Get him out of bed. Anybody's bed.' Now, Meade is not shown as in a bed when he answers, but only a few minutes later Jon phones Ed (in Nancy's apartment) and says he wants Ed to go to the police station and see who they're questioning. He's already sent Meade, whom he located in Mark's apartment. Although a further feature of the film is that the characters seem to get very little sleep, it looks as if Ed in Nancy's apartment (where he has gone for sex) and Meade in Mark's apartment are being rather subversively paralleled.

At the police station, Ed listens in for about a minute to their interrogation of Pilski and knows that he isn't the

killer. Later, Meade jumps to the conclusion that Pilski is the killer — his fingerprints were on the murder weapon, a monkey wrench — and, reporting this to Mark, makes the latter look foolish in front of Walter. On the surface, what we have here is a straightforward moral contrast: Mark bribes Meade to get him on his side, but Meade is so dumb he spends hours in the police station and still gets it wrong; Jon asks Ed as a friend to see what the police know, and Ed — through his friendship with Burt — is able to assess the situation quickly and accurately. But under the surface is the intriguing question of what really went on between Mark and Meade. After Meade's blunder, when Mark phones and sacks him, he says 'Don't call yourself "My boy," Meade — you're through!'

While the City Sleeps works brilliantly at the surface level — it is a prime example of a film which could be analysed sequence by sequence and line by line for meaning, much as William Rothman has analysed *Notorious*⁶ — but it becomes even more intriguing in its subtexts. Here I would isolate two dominant subtexts — the ideological and the psychoanalytical — whilst recognising that they constantly interrelate.

Superficially, the film is ideologically conservative. (1) The hero, Ed, is not contaminated in the power struggle by scrambling himself for the new post. But, as hero, he works with the police to capture the killer, and then hands to Jon the scoop that the latter has been working for. His telecast taunting the killer — in which he accuses him of being a 'mama's boy' — knowingly endangers Nancy, to whom Ed has just become engaged, but he provides her with constant police protection and is sufficiently guilt-ridden when his plan almost goes wrong to resign his job. And when Walter, to save face, appoints Harry Kritzer to the coveted post, Ed makes a speech of contempt about Walter in the latter's presence and shames him into making a different series of appointments. (2) As a result of this final reshuffle, everyone gets their 'just deserts' and the power structure is reaffirmed. Walter 'grows up' (in Ed's words) and makes meritorious appointments rather than a pusillanimous one, but he is still the boss, deciding people's fates. Jon becomes the new executive director, Harry is despatched abroad, and both Dorothy and Mildred are recuperated: the former (we assume) is now stuck with Walter full-time and Mildred becomes Walter's 'personal assistant.' (Ed's comment on this last 'Romance is not dead' is rather cynical: Walter is very far indeed from a romantic figure.) As for Ed, he is offered the editorship of *The Sentinel*, and although he complains ('What does he think? Everybody has to jump when he whistles?'), the implication is that he will take the job. (3) The woman. The prim and proper Nancy wins the hero. The sophisticated, sexually independent Mildred wins Walter Kyne! Nancy, pure, is protected by 'fate' from the killer (when the killer pretends to be Ed outside her door, she's deceived, but she refuses to open the door because she's still angry at Ed's hanky-panky with Mildred); Dorothy, the adulterous wife, arriving (by fate) at the same instant — Harry's 'love nest' is just across the hall from Nancy's apartment — is punished by being practically strangled.

However, characteristic of Lang, all the above are complicated and ironised. First, the women, Nancy as 'good

woman' is indeed criticised — as both Laurie Clancy and Ann Kaplan point out. Compared to Mildred, with her open and relaxed attitude to sexuality, Nancy seems repressed: there is a definite hint that she is withholding her sexual favours from Ed as a lure to ensure marriage. Certainly, after they have become engaged, Nancy now seems prepared to sleep with Ed ('I'd do anything you ask me'), although she then seems secretly relieved when Jon's phone call interrupts them and Ed is sent off to the police station ('All things considered, it's probably just as well'). Nancy both envies and resents Mildred, her attitude caught in her use of the adjective 'common': 'You don't want a bride — you want an illiterate common-law woman... Mildred Donner's more your type — try her' and, later, 'The next thing I know he's caressing Mildred Donner in a common carrier.' Although Nancy is unable quite to say that Mildred herself is common, this is evidently what she wants to say, and what she is implying. But Mildred is anything but common: the contrast between the two women is perhaps most clearly specified in terms of the sophistication which Mildred possesses and Nancy lacks. This is shown in many details, from their respective jobs through the way they dress and behave to the final telling point that Mildred of course recognises the woman who had been assaulted in Harry's apartment as Dorothy Kyne, whereas to Nancy she was the safely anonymous Mrs. Smith.

Mildred is undoubtedly Lang's preferred female character: intelligent, ironic, independent, and wonderfully sexy — in her relationships with men, it's obvious she knows exactly what she's doing. Dorothy, by contrast, is rather more stereotyped (and Rhonda Fleming is no Ida Lupino). In one of her scenes with Harry, she tries to assert herself ('If I make my husband give you the big prize, you won't be Walter's man, you'll be mine'), but she's not very convincing. Dorothy says that Walter 'bought' her — but the joke about her response when he first eyed her up ('Window shopping?') suggests that she offered herself to be 'bought.' Nevertheless, the scene in which she exercises in a bikini and Walter, in shorts, keeps failing to putt his golf balls into a strategically positioned glass makes a succinct Freudian comment on her marriage. In part, it is implied that the effete Walter is such a failure as a man that he deserves to have an unfaithful wife. However, the irony here is that Harry seems at least as ineffectual as Walter. When the two men are first shown together — in the scene after Amos's death — Lang positions the camera so that they are visualised as mirror images of one another.

Second, the film repeatedly stresses male exploitation of women. Ed's callous use of Nancy as bait for the killer (which he does not deign to discuss with her in advance) is echoed in Mark's use of Mildred (going so far as to suggest that she sleep with Ed in order to get him on Mark's side) and Harry's of Dorothy (Harry does nothing in the race for

get rid of Nancy. This returns us to the hero, and one of the film's most fascinating subtexts: the links between the hero and the killer. These are set up in a whole series of connections:

i) Early in the film, both unsnib a lock in order to gain access to a woman's room without her consent: Manners to murder, Ed to seduce. But, even though Ed then phones Meade to ask if Judith had such a lock, his realisation that the killer could have entered Judith's apartment this way is not followed up — if it had been, it would have immediately cast suspicion on the drugstore delivery boy. This emphasises the link's symbolic or associative importance.

ii) Ed repeatedly reads the killer's mind. He 'knows' he's a mama's boy; that Judith was not his first murder; that he's also responsible for the second murder we see (confirmed by the sight of the rifled drawers: discussed below); that he reads comics; that he's liable to attack Nancy in daylight whilst she's guarded. When he pursues him into the subway towards the end, it's like a descent into the underworld to do battle with his evil side.

iii) Both are aroused by the sight of a woman's stockinged legs: Ed Nancy's, Manners Dorothy's. As in (i), Ed's arousal is sexual; Manners' murderous.

iv) Manners writes 'Ask mother'; Ed says to Nancy (he's pursuing the question of her stockings by asking her what holds them up) 'I didn't ask my mother, I asked you.'

v) Having gained access to Nancy's room, Ed finds she is prepared to marry him. And, as mentioned, she also now seems prepared to sleep with him. However, this is interrupted by Jon's phone call despatching Ed to the police station: unsurprisingly, Ed is somewhat ungracious in saying he'll go. It's 3 a.m. on the Tuesday morning: we later learn that this was the time of Manners' next murder. It's as if Ed's sexual frustration triggered Manners' murderousness.

vi) On the Tuesday night, after Manners has been aroused by the sight of Dorothy adjusting her stockings — but has not been quick enough to unsnib the lock — he discovers that Nancy's apartment is opposite. Like Ed the previous night, he, too, now seeks to 'break in': he stands, knife at the ready, waiting for her to answer the doorbell. The sexual overtones to his murderousness are explicit in the way he holds the knife; at this moment Ed is being chatted up by Mildred in 'The Dell' and clearly responding.

In four of these cases the underlying connection is that established in the first example: Ed's sexual desire is linked to Manners' murderous desire. However, whilst this is the dominant paradigm, it is by no means the only way in which the two are linked. There are also further examples:

vii) When Nancy falls out with Ed, she refuses to open her door to let him in. In fact, it is the killer, pretending to be Ed, who is outside: the killer whose threat to Nancy has been unleashed by Ed. Moreover, we would expect Ed at this point to have aggressive feelings towards Nancy: she

woman' is indeed criticised — as both Laurie Clancy and Ann Kaplan point out. Compared to Mildred, with her open and relaxed attitude to sexuality, Nancy seems repressed: there is a definite hint that she is withholding her sexual favours from Ed as a lure to ensure marriage. Certainly, after they have become engaged, Nancy now seems prepared to sleep with Ed ('I'd do anything you ask me'), although she then seems secretly relieved when Jon's phone call interrupts them and Ed is sent off to the police station ('All things considered, it's probably just as well'). Nancy both envies and resents Mildred, her attitude caught in her use of the adjective 'common': 'You don't want a bride — you want an illiterate common-law woman... Mildred Donner's more your type — try her' and, later, 'The next thing I know he's caressing Mildred Donner in a common carrier.' Although Nancy is unable quite to say that Mildred herself is common, this is evidently what she wants to say, and what she is implying. But Mildred is anything but common: the contrast between the two women is perhaps most clearly specified in terms of the sophistication which Mildred possesses and Nancy lacks. This is shown in many details, from their respective jobs through the way they dress and behave to the final telling point that Mildred of course recognises the woman who had been assaulted in Harry's apartment as Dorothy Kyne, whereas to Nancy she was the safely anonymous Mrs. Smith.

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get rid of Nancy. This returns us to the hero, and one of the film's most fascinating subtexts: the links between the hero and the killer. These are set up in a whole series of connections:

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vii) When Nancy falls out with Ed, she refuses to open her door to let him in. In fact, it is the killer, pretending to be Ed, who is outside: the killer whose threat to Nancy has been unleashed by Ed. Moreover, we would expect Ed at this point to have aggressive feelings towards Nancy: she has, after all, walked out on him and he feels she's been unjust: 'But I didn't do anything!' As Manners, in frustration, throws himself against the door, he's exactly like Ed's Id. (C.F. the way 'the Monster from the Id' in *Forbidden Planet*, also 1956, forces its way through doors to destroy).

viii) When Burt describes to Ed and Nancy his latest find-



Burt Kaufmann (Howard Duff), right, outlines to Nancy (Sally Forrest) and Ed his latest finding on the killer.

ings about the killer, he mentions a string of 'unsolved burglaries': 'He steals only ladies' things from lone, unprotected girls: this guy's a real nut on dames.' Nancy retorts 'This description begins to fit Mobley.' This leads to the most remarkable aspect of the links between the two men: their fascination with women's clothes. The brief scene between Manners and his mother (Mae Marsh) refers to a 'traumatic incident' when he was eight years old: his mother, who had really wanted a girl, dressed him up like one. Whilst this information is conveyed rather too glibly — as critics have been quick to point out — no one has traced the full repercussions of the childhood trauma.

First, contrary to Robin Wood's suggestion,⁷ these have nothing to do with homosexuality. Mrs Manners treated her son in a way which 'perverted' his relationships with women, but women continue to be his focus of interest. Second, his criminal life as an adolescent began with him stealing women's clothes; murder came later. But he continues — we gather — to steal the women's clothes: in each of the two cases we see (later identified as his third and fourth victims), the victim's drawers have been rifled. Now, we have no idea what Manners does with the clothes, but his stealing them at least hints at a re-enactment of the childhood trauma, just as murdering the women suggests the contradictory impulse to repress the childhood trauma. But what is one to make of Ed's fascination with Nancy's nylon stockings, with what holds them up, with her see-through nightie ('a shortie, too')? There would seem to be a rather interesting — if only hinted-at — subtext here. Not only are we first introduced to the hero as he's having make-up applied, but (a) Lang reaches this image through a series of dissolves from Manners' 'Ask mother' in lipstick on the wall and (b) Ed is the only person we see either applying or having make-up applied throughout the film. (I except Walter

oilings Dorothy's back, which is rather different.) It is Ed who first mentions that Judith's dresser drawers were found open when she was murdered and, when he sees the rifled clothes drawers in the apartment of Laura Kelly, the next victim, he points them out to Burt with a smile: he *understands* the killer.

The comic books provide a further thread. In *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred*,⁸ Robert J Stoller argues that adult 'perversions' — which are fuelled by explicit or implicit hatred — are re-enactments of childhood traumas, a re-enactment which is an attempt to master the trauma and preserve potency. 'My hypothesis is that perversion is the reliving of an actual...sexual trauma aimed precisely at one's sex...or gender identity (masculinity or femininity) and that in the perverse act the past is rubbed out. This time, trauma is turned into pleasure, orgasm, victory. But the need to do it again — ...in the same manner — comes from one's inability to get rid of the danger, the trauma' (p 6). He also argues that the perversion evolves: 'One has to ensure, over the years of trial and error in constructing the fantasy, that one finally arrives at a rendering — the adult perversion — that works smoothly.' (p 7). He also suggests that perversions need an element of risk involved in their enactment.

Manners leaves a comic book behind when he murders Laura Kelly, and holds one as he watches Ed's telecast. Both are called *The Strangler* and have covers which graphically depict male violence against women. In effect, we are

6. William Rothman: "Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious*" in *The Georgia Review* 29 (Winter 1975).

7. Robin Wood: "Creativity and Evaluation: two films noirs of the '50s" in *CineAction!* 21/22 (Summer/Fall 1990), p 19.

8. Robert J Stoller: *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred* (Quartet Books, 1977).

dealing here with the pornography of violence. During Ed's telecast, Manners is also in his pajamas and a rumpled bed is in the background: the scene is redolent with overtones of adolescent masturbation. (When his mother knocks at the door, he even scrambles to hide the comic and substitute a text-book, emphasising the overtones.) As far as is possible for a mid-'50s movie, the film suggests that Manners enacts masturbatory fantasies in his bedroom (with the women's clothes?) but that these are insufficient to satisfy his perversion: he also has to kill. That his murders are perversions of the sex act is clear enough: the opening murder with the wrench (which students are quick to note anticipates *Psycho's* shower-bath murder); the strangling of Laura Kelly on her bed; the way he stands outside Nancy's apartment, knife in hand; the way he strangles Dorothy, which is very like a rape. And, again conforming to Stoller's thesis, each assault involves a greater risk, and hence more excitement.

Ed's relationship to this is more complicated than in the other instances. On the one hand, his understanding of Manners certainly goes some way towards putting the various elements together — the women's clothes, the comic books, the hatred of the mother. On the other, when he addresses Manners through the telecast, Ed is clearly a father-figure. This identification is clinched when Manners, unnerved by how much Ed 'knows' about him, drops the comic book between his legs. It's an image of symbolic castration — repeated elsewhere in Lang's movies, e.g., the knife being knocked from Beckert's hand in *M*; Chris (Edward G. Robinson) dropping a knife between his legs in *Scarlet Street* (1945) — but it also refers to the traditional threat parents utter to sons about masturbation: 'It'll drop off.'

But Ed, too, has his moments of castration anxiety: having tricked his way into Nancy's apartment, he discovers he doesn't have a pencil; when Nancy refuses to have anything to do with him after the incident with Mildred, he says, "My limb got sawed off." In fact, the film implies that the lack is a rather more regular occurrence. If we unravel all Ed's different versions of what went on between him and Mildred, it seems fairly clear that his first statement is the most accurate: "I got sick and went home." In the taxi with Mildred, Ed points out that he's hardly slept for two nights and he's very drunk: he's obviously in no state for sexual transgression. Ed's excessive drinking could indeed be a means of avoiding having to demonstrate his virility, and Mildred's caustic comment — in Jon's words, "She says she knows now you won the Pulitzer Prize for — writing" — an accurate statement of his sexual inadequacy. In the early hours of Tuesday morning, Jon's phone call could also be seen as saving Ed from having to discover whether his lack of a pencil is significant. In the early hours of Wednesday morning, Lang makes a series of visual links. As Ed in the taxi muses "I wonder what the nice people are doing tonight?" Lang cuts to Nancy, delightedly unpacking the roses he has sent her. The association has some fine ironies — Ed is at that moment being 'seduced' by Mildred; the roses have already helped identify Nancy to the killer — but Lang then dissolves from Nancy to Manners, lying on his bed, sketching his own face into

Harry's 'art-work' on the front page of *The Sentinel*. Not only does this show that Manners possesses the pencil, but he is using it on his bed to image himself as the killer. The iconography complements that on the front covers of *The Strangler* comics: it's as if, his impulse to murder having been frustrated, he's reduced, once more, to constructing a masturbatory fantasy in his bedroom.

The links between the hero and the killer are multiple and complex, suggesting that the film is imputing to the hero a 'disturbance in the sphere of sexuality' which the killer's more explicit disturbance dramatises at a more primitive level. Ed's disturbance, it is implied, relates to a repressed unresolved hostility towards women which only manifests itself on the surface in his need for drink, both to lubricate his relationships with women (Nancy complains that he only proposes when he's had a few) and to stop him from becoming too involved (it's when he says he'll put the proposal in writing that he discovers he doesn't have a pencil). But why should Ed in his unconscious wish harm to come to Nancy? Here everything becomes more speculative. However, two points may be made about the scene in which links (iii) and (iv) occur. When Ed asks Nancy what holds her stockings up, she replies 'There's a lot your mother should have told you.' In other words, Ed's mother should have enlightened him about women's underwear, which surely implies she should have taught him about sexual matters. Now, as Ed admires Nancy's stockings, he is half-way down the stairs, looking up at her through the bannisters. It would not take too great a leap of imagination to see him positioned like a child in its cot, looking up through the bars at its mother. Ed then walks back up the stairs, saying 'I didn't ask my mother...', and returns to Nancy in her doorway. She comments 'Hadh't we said goodnight before you got interested in my nylons?' Ed replies 'I can't remember when I wasn't interested.' This, in turn, positions Nancy as the mother: the figure on whom the little boy's sexual curiosity first fastens. Given that the source of Manners' disturbance was his mother, and given the links the film establishes between hero and killer, if Nancy can be seen as in some sense like Ed's mother, then his unconscious wish to harm her makes sense. Even more speculatively, I would also like to cite the dissolve from Nancy to Manners on the bed. Nancy has just taken the roses out of their box and is holding them up to smell them. As she does this, the dissolve superimposes Manners' head over the roses: for a fleeting moment, it is as if she is tenderly kissing it — as a mother would a child.

At the same time, Ed's putting Nancy in danger from the killer could equally be related to a *preconscious* desire — to demonstrate his powers as hero by racing to save her at the last minute: which is almost exactly what happens. (Almost, because it is in fact Dorothy who is being attacked as Ed races to the rescue: a point Lang emphasises by cutting from the attack to the police car containing Ed and Burt tearing through the streets. I discuss the implications of this below.) Nancy has already gently chided Ed for his lack of ambition: it would not be difficult to imagine him wishing to prove himself to her. The unconscious wish to kill Nancy and the preconscious wish to save her are thus both set in

motion by the juxtaposition of the taunting message and the announcement of their engagement. Finally, apart from any hypothesised link between Nancy and Ed's mother — the Oedipal trajectory — the differences between Nancy and Mildred point to why Ed prefers the former. He may flirt with Mildred, but ultimately her sexual experience is a threat: he feels more in control with the virginal Nancy.

The example of Bellour's I wish to look at more closely occurs whilst Ed is being chatted up by Mildred in 'The Dell.' After failing to get into Nancy's apartment on the Tuesday evening — mentioned in link (vi) — Manners goes to the Kyne Building. From there he moves down the street to 'The Dell' and looks into the bar — which is below street level — through a low window. We see a point of view shot, through the glass, of Mildred and Ed inside, still sitting at the bar below. Bellour comments 'everything implies that the image represents exactly what the killer is seeing, but since Lang cuts to something else instead of returning to the killer, there is no proof of this' (p 31). The 'something else' is simply a change of point of view: Lang cuts to the interior of

'The Dell,' with the camera now on the other side of Mildred and Ed and looking back along the bar. Albeit an unusual example, it is, in fact, a reverse angle shot to the previous one: Ed and Mildred are in the foreground, the window through which Manners looked is in the background at the top of the image. There is absolutely no ambiguity about what we are seeing here: between the two shots Lang even matches continuity on the movement of Carlo (Pitt Herbert), the barman — a characteristic example of the precision of the *découpage*.

Equally, Lang has shifted to a new point of view for a clear purpose. In the first shot, we shared the point of view of the killer, who in effect is stalking Ed. In the second shot, Ed and Mildred are in the foreground talking to Carlo about what they're up to: Mildred tells him that they're discussing romance. Lang continues to hold the shot as Manners then appears in the background, coming down the stairs into the bar. This is a narrative motif in the film: six times characters make entrances down the same stairs, and each time the entrance is co-ordinate with what is already going on in the

The killer, Robert Manners (John Barrymore Jr.) forces his way into Harry's love-nest to attack Dorothy.



bar — an example of Lang's *narrative* precision. On this occasion, Manners' entrance coincides with Ed saying, "You see, Carlo, there is also a physical side to love: some women are more demanding than others." Now, an inability to consummate the 'physical side of love' is subtextually what haunts Ed all through the movie. (In his first conversation with Nancy, he suggests that they have drinks at her place, only to receive the response: "Oh, no, we've tried my place.") Equally, a murderous desire directed towards women is what impels Manners. Since the film suggests repeatedly that Manners is Ed's Id-figure, by linking his appearance here with both Ed's expressed desire for sexual transgression and his incapacitating drunkenness, Lang strengthens the view that the hero's inadequacies are bound up with an unresolved hostility towards women.

We would, however, expect this scene to be doubly significant, since it is the first time the two men are physically in the same space. But Lang plays down the potential for suspense: continuing the take, he dollies forward and pans to isolate Mildred and Ed in a two-shot, as if rejecting the idea that Manners could be a threat. By now Ed is very drunk. However, pressed by Mildred, he nevertheless says that he finds her attractive; she promptly invites him to her place. (In other words, she makes the offer Nancy refused at the beginning.) As they leave, Ed stumbles against Manners' stool and drunkenly apologises. Manners tenses, but otherwise controls himself and watches as they go up the stairs, Mildred having to assist Ed in his drunkenness. Just as Ed was a father-figure when, over the TV, he lectured Manners in his bedroom, so here, — from Manners' point of view — he is like a drunken father being helped up to bed by the mother. And Manners is too insecure to attack Ed as a father-figure: he makes no attempt to follow them, but simply goes home to doodle with his pencil.

To summarise, the film not only depicts Manners as an Id-figure to Ed, but also depicts Ed as a castrating father-figure to Manners. The former helps express and account for the hero's flaws and weaknesses (a typical Lang feature), the latter refers to a more general feature in the film: the 'problem of the father.' This brings us to the final main ideological issue: the extent to which the film subverts the power structure of Kyne Enterprises. To explore this it will be necessary to return to the opening sequences and consider a different aspect of the psychoanalytical subtext.

When Pilski answers the door to Manners, he is carrying a monkey wrench; the same wrench which will be used by Manners, moments later, when he 'bludgeons' (Ed's word) Judith to death. Given that Manners only attacks after Pilski ('Pop') has left, and that the film's second sequence ends with the death of Amos Kyne, the patriarch, there is clearly a link here in terms of 'the father' and the repercussions of his absence/death. Manners assumes the phallus, without the authority of the father, as a weapon, and the violence against women thus unleashed echoes through the film at the social level: the women of New York are threatened by a serial killer. In more general terms, Manners unleashes chaos.

Before Amos dies, he sets in motion the tabloid story which will increase the chaos: his wish to strike fear into the women of America. Then, when he does die, his death caus-





Having been caught in an affair with Walter's wife by Mildred (Ida Lupino), Harry (in the hat) returns to the office to confront Walter (centre). Jon (left) looks on; his 'extra' in the foreground.

es chaos at the micro-level of the company: his successor is weak; the competition for the coveted post leads to self-interest, manoeuvrings and back-stabbing, rather than to co-operation. (When Walter finally complains, "I'd like a little more co-operation around here," he reveals the extent of his blindness to the consequences of initiating the competition.) However, one form of this 'chaos' directly mirrors that in the social sphere: the exploitation of women by the men in the company. When Dorothy is attacked by Manners, two separate threads converge: Harry's use of Dorothy to help get him the job (it's on his account she's visiting his apartment) and Ed's wish to help Jon get the job by taunting the killer, which has led to Manners — who is going after Nancy — to be there at that particular moment. It's a nice irony that the woman who is almost '*la cinquième victime*' (the film's French title) is Walter's wife. Finally, in insisting that the man who catches the killer gets the job, Walter is in effect carrying out his father's last wish — to play up the story — i.e., he is demonstrating that he is a good son. Patriarchal succession *perpetuates* the chaos.

When Walter first talks to Ed, he says, "Whenever my father got sore at me, which was often, he'd talk about you." As he says this, he takes hold of his cane. The gesture is ambiguous: he may be recalling more youthful days, when his father beat him; he may even be registering a desire to beat Ed. But, as he continues to hold the cane throughout the rest of the scene, symbolically it becomes his (playboy) phallus. From this point of view, his holding it as he talks about his father's favouring Ed may be seen as an assertion of his masculinity in the face of the threat he feels from Ed; shortly afterwards, he uses it to gesture towards his father's portrait, as if defying the patriarchal authority embodied by the portrait. He uses it most demonstratively, however, when he describes to Ed his plan for the competition for executive director: Walter is very pleased with the plan, and flourishes the cane around. Walter's 'assumption of the phallus,' like Manners', is thus linked to the 'chaos' which ensues in its wake.

Throughout this scene, Amos's portrait is stressed. Indeed, the scene begins with a dissolve which blends the upper part of the Kyne Building into the frame of the portrait, a visual matching which has great significance: the phallic building is precisely identified with Amos as patriarch. At the beginning of the scene Walter, viewed in long shot across the room, is dwarfed by the portrait, which occupies the dominant position in the image. By the end, he confronts the portrait as if to challenge it, and Lang tracks in to emphasise his new-found assumption of authority. (This is one of the shots Bellour completely misdescribes, first in the positioning of the characters, second in the movement of the camera.) But we never again see Walter in Amos's study: implicitly, the film is saying that he hasn't the authority to operate from there; that his more appropriate setting is his luxury apartment. However, if Walter is at first too weak to be another father-figure to Ed, this role is taken over by Jon. The symbolic overtones of this become clear when Jon phones Ed at Nancy's at 3 a.m., interrupting Ed's engagement and the sex which seems about to follow, and sends him off 'on duty.' Jon, here, is a Superego-figure, cen-

suring the sex ('What do I care you're engaged?') and redirecting the hero — the Ego — towards 'the law.' The significance of the interruption is confirmed at the end of the film, when Ed declines to answer the phone (it's assumed to be Walter, offering him Jon's old job) in order, finally, to have sex with Nancy.

In the meantime, however, Ed has been between the two worlds of the Superego (embodied in particular by Jon) and the Id (embodied by Manners). When he endangers Nancy's life, he is doing it (officially) for Jon, even though the film suggests that more contradictory reasons underlie the action. However, it is not until Manners as Id-figure has been captured and placed in custody that Ed is released from his obligation to Jon. Equally, it is not until Ed has defied Walter with his speech of contempt that he is reunited with Nancy for the traditional happy ending of marriage and a honeymoon. From this point of view, the film deals with a characteristic problem for a hero: what place can he have in the system? It is surely no accident that Ed is never seen at home; that he hardly ever even seems to go home; that he seems in a permanent state of transit. In declining Amos's offer of becoming his successor, he is also declining the pressure and commitment that goes along with that: Amos has made the office his home; he lives for nothing else.

Just as Jon as Superego-figure interrupts the anticipated sex between Ed and Nancy, so Manners as Id-figure interrupts the anticipated sex between Harry and Dorothy. (Harry starts very guiltily when the doorbell rings: as if he thinks it's Walter.) And, although Manners is unable to get to Dorothy on this occasion, the next day she just happens to turn up when he is being frustrated in his attempt to break into Nancy's apartment: in effect, the assault on her is merely delayed. But, since Manners is still very much Ed's Id-figure, the assault is surely symbolically significant: unconsciously, Manners has tracked down the adulterous wife of the patriarch, just as Ed might unconsciously have put two and two together, and realised that the blonde that 'honest' Harry Kritzer had 'stashed away on the side' was Dorothy Kyne.

Manners' disturbance is traced to the lack of a father: he was adopted, but the father deserted them. And so, the disturbance in both the film's spheres is related to the absence of a strong father-figure. In the social sphere, the disturbance can only be removed by capture and incarceration: the final shot of Manners — the photograph on the front page of *The Sentinel* — shows him in custody and being fingerprinted. In the company, where what is at stake is the issue of succession, Walter needs to 'grow up' and become more like the sort of son his father wanted: the havoc which his policies have wrought must be brought under control. And the film suggests that this is, finally, what happens. Throughout the narrative, the power structure of the company is subverted by the complex of rivalries and Oedipal positions which the film exposes. But, by the end, Walter has learned from his mistakes, and the new corporate structure he institutes has moved away from the authoritarian rule of the founding father to a potentially more co-operative regime. If Walter lacks his father's drive, he neverthe-

less learns to appreciate the qualities of his staff, as in his praise for the 'doll of a front page' on the Wednesday evening.

The issue of 'patriarchal succession' comes up in a number of melodramas of the era: *Executive Suite* (1953), for example, focuses entirely on the boardroom battle for succession. A more interesting comparison may, however, be drawn with two famous auteurist melodramas: Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1956) and Minnelli's *Home from the Hill* (1960). In the former, the relationship between the patriarch Jasper Hadley (Robert Keith) and his two 'sons' — Kyle (Robert Stack), his actual son, and Mitch (Rock Hudson), who is like a surrogate son — is very similar to that in *While the City Sleeps* between Amos and his two 'sons.' In each film, the genetic son, spoilt, has become a weak playboy, and knows he cannot fill his father's shoes. His feelings of inadequacy are expressed in anxieties about potency — explicit in Kyle's case, masked in Walter's. (Walter is very good at pretending that all is well with his marriage, even though he has ample evidence to the contrary, such as the frequency with which Dorothy goes out in the evenings to visit her 'mother.') The surrogate son, by contrast, has earned his position in the company through ability: he would be capable of taking over from the patriarch, but he lacks an interest in power. Dealing with business empires, the films are also linked in other ways, e.g., the death of the patriarch from a heart attack, essentially (Amos) or partly (Jasper) the consequence of driving himself too hard. Finally, each patriarch is not only identified with a similarly shaped phallic building with his name inscribed on it, but also has a large portrait of himself in his study, a portrait which 'refers to' an important discourse in the film: the empty chair Amos stands behind raising the question of his succession; the model derrick Jasper holds demonstrating the phallic power which he possesses and Kyle lacks.

Home from the Hill (1960) reinfects the material slightly. Here both young men are the actual sons of the patriarch, Wade Hunnicutt (Robert Mitchum), but Theron (George Hamilton) is legitimate and Rafe (George Peppard) illegitimate. Otherwise, the difference between them is much the same as in the other movies: Theron is spoilt, callow, weak and irresponsible; Rafe, deprived of any inherited privileges, is strong, mature and responsible. Each of the three films registers a very American fear of the emasculating effect of inherited wealth, although Wade, the youngest and most potent of the patriarchal figures, at least recognises the problem and endeavours to 'educate' Theron to be his successor. The question of succession is nevertheless still highly problematised. Collectively, the films would seem to be suggesting that American capitalism — and this would include Hollywood — was facing a crisis of succession: with the founding fathers of the great empires either dead or dying, who on earth was strong enough to replace them? (Although each of the patriarchs is criticised, his achievement in founding and building the empire which bears his name is implicitly admired.) But only *While the City Sleeps* introduces the death of the patriarch at the beginning, so that the question of his succession can be worked through in the narrative.

Equally, *While the City Sleeps* is the only one of the three films to work towards a version — however qualified — of the 'restoration of the father.' In *Written on the Wind*, with Kyle dead, succession passes to an unwilling Marylee (Dorothy Malone), Jasper's daughter, and in *Home from the Hill*, with Theron having gone into self-imposed exile, succession is simply left hanging. Instead, the narrative movement at the end of these films is away from the empire: Mitch leaves the Hadley homestead with Lucy (Lauren Bacall), Kyle's widow; Rafe invites Hannah (Eleanor Parker), Wade's widow, home to meet her grandson. The phallic power of the dead patriarch is still stressed: Marylee sits beneath her father's portrait, herself clutching the model derrick; Wade's huge red marble tombstone dominates the graveyard setting of *Home from the Hill*'s final scene. But it is now a dead power: renewal is located elsewhere. *While the City Sleeps* ends with a similar movement away from the empire — Nancy makes the point that Florida is a long way to come for a honeymoon — but Walter in effect catches up with them; first through his new series of appointments (reported in the local paper) and second through his phone call. Whilst the ending is by no means as compromised as that of *Metropolis*, the two films share a sense that Lang would ultimately prefer to see the empire continue rather than be destroyed, and would rather concentrate on educating the patriarch than deposing him.

P.S.: *While the City Sleeps* refers repeatedly to *Citizen Kane*: the Kane/Kyne similarity; the death of the patriarch at the beginning; the nationwide empire (the map of the USA covered with a media network which introduces the Kyne TV News transmissions echoes a similar map in *Kane*'s news-reel); the K logo; the newspaper discourse, etc. But Lang's purpose in making the links is surely to emphasise his completely different project. Rather than the story of one man — the patriarch — over his lifetime, Lang is interested in the network of relationships within the company and in the question of what happens when the patriarch dies: his concern is with continuity. In general, Welles' films tend to gravitate around an egotistical, larger-than-life figure — usually played by Welles himself — and to exhaust their interest when the figure dies. By contrast, Lang's films tend to move freely between the personal and the social; no single figure dominates and his endings typically have a sense that 'life goes on' (albeit, in a film like *Scarlet Street*, deeply pessimistically). Lang shows his indifference to Welles' project in the scene in Amos's study when Walter meets the three executives. During the scene, Harry declares suddenly that he's arranged to 'copyright a feature on the old man's life.' But, as he says this, what Lang captures is Harry's ingratiating insincerity in the way he clasps his hands in front of him as he addresses Walter. (Jon's expression as he witnesses this is wonderful.) Walter shows very little interest in the idea. That's the last we hear of it.

My colleague, Leighton Grist, made a number of useful suggestions during the drafting of this essay, and I would like to acknowledge his contributions.

TALK '39

RE-READING
GEORGE CUKOR'S
THE WOMEN

by Viveca Gretton



The Women: Joan Fontaine, Norma Shearer, Rosalind Russell, Mary Boland, Paulette Goddard

George Cukor's *The Women* (1939), a film whose unabashedly misogynist premise seems to defy feminist reappropriation, occupies a curious position in the work of a Hollywood artist celebrated for directing strongly sympathetic, women-centered narratives. Often perceived as Cukor's "consolation prize" for being replaced as director of *Gone With the Wind*, *The Women*, with its exclusively female cast, further advanced his reputation at the time as a women's director in the minds of both studio and public alike.¹ *The Women*, promoted and critically received as a sophisticated bitch-fest, capitalized as much on the well-publicized professional rivalry between MGM's leading

stars, Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, and Rosalind Russell, as upon Cukor's perceived ability to "handle" them.²

To many feminists, a reevaluation of *The Women* would only furnish further proof that critical analysis of Hollywood cinema has, indeed, exhausted itself and remains a regressively empty exercise. Even to feminist critics such as myself, who continue to find classical cinema a rich area for exploration, *The Women* might seem a perverse choice for analysis. Unlike other Cukor films such as *Sylvia Scarlett* (1936), *Camille* (1937), *Gaslight* (1944), or *A Star is Born* (1954), *The Women* appears little more than an annoying, woman-against-woman film which would require mas-



sive critical intervention to renovate. From its notorious opening "menagerie" sequence to the last shot of a repentant Shearer rushing to surrender herself to domestic bliss, it is a narrative that vigorously sustains the notion that a "natural" enmity exists between women.

Nevertheless, despite the film's decidedly pre-feminist consciousness, *The Women* provides moments of pleasure and identification that, for me, complicate its outright dismissal on the grounds of being either a merely contemptible, reactionary film or an amusing, "camp" battle of the bitches.³ The brief analysis offered here will not be concerned with renovating a decidedly problematic film, or for

that matter, apologizing for Cukor's involvement with it.⁴ Rather, I will suggest areas in which *The Women* warrants consideration, if not as a subversive text, as a film that continually foregrounds the conditions which define and structure women and women's relationships without entirely containing either:

- (a) Despite the unseen male "presence" that seems entirely to govern the narrative and to divide the female characters from one another, women discover strength and wield power in an ever-shifting series of strictly feminine alliances; such power is further exercised and regulated as a relentless discourse that operates and intersects at all levels of class, age, and experience;
- (b) Despite the "blissful" resolution at the end of the film, both romantic love and bourgeois domesticity are comically

1. Claire Boothe's successful play was originally assigned to Ernst Lubitsch, who gladly abandoned it to direct Garbo in *Nimotchka*, a project that Cukor also wanted. According to Patrick McGilligan, MGM pushed *The Women*, now adrift without a director, as an obvious match for Cukor's talent for directing strong actresses in literary and stage adaptations. In part, this helped the studio justify removing Cukor from *Gone With the Wind*. See George Cukor: *A Double Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

2. McGilligan's biography promises to address the issue of Cukor's status as a "women's director." However, though McGilligan's research is indeed impressive, his analyses of Cukor's films are less engaging; he fails to advance any significant critical arguments or insights regarding Cukor's position as a gay director in Hollywood, and rarely questions accepted notions of women's films.

3. Carlos Clarens argues that *The Women* is based on a "misogynist conceit" yet seems unaware of the misogyny of his own conclusion that "none but the most committed, or humorless, feminist could take offense at this satirical contest in bitch-hunting, the world seen as a vast bestiary." *George Cukor*, (London: BFI, 1976) 64.

4. The film's many difficulties cannot be ascribed to Cukor alone. As Richard Lippe argues, to do so would obscure both the political and historical conditions under which his films were produced. Such a reading would also elide the positive contribution made by the collaboration between Cukor and the cast of *The Women*. See Richard Lippe, "Authorship and Cukor: A Reappraisal," *Cineaction* 21-22 (Summer/Fall, 1990) 29-30. Cukor himself has commented on the dated ideology reflected in the film, and suggested that today Crystal might well be involved with another woman instead of a married man. See Gavin Lambert, *On Cukor* (New York: Putnam, 1972) 136.

demonstrated to be artificial constructs necessary only to ensure the economic security and social status available to women;

(c) The issue of woman as mere spectacle is complicated by the pleasurable identifications with powerful and uncompromising star presences such as Crawford, Shearer, and Russell.

It seems rather obvious that the physical exclusion of men from the film results, paradoxically, in the predominance of a masculine "presence" that seems to organize the narrative; men are indeed the sole and unquestioned objects of feminine desire in this chaotically comic universe of women.⁵ Yet there is a subtle tension between the silent, monolithic male "voice" that is felt to preside over the narrative and the multitude of feminine voices that appear to have simplistically internalized all of its demands. The advice that women give each other, for instance, seems wholly to endorse a system of patriarchal values, yet, while the voice of feminine experience prescribes submissive behaviour, silence, and compromise, female characters themselves only rarely exhibit any of these "qualities." In fact, submissive behaviour is revealed as little more than a fabulously calculated performance, silence only signals a retreat before a relentless barrage of feminine wit, and compromise becomes an aggressive tactic deployed to ensure survival (as Miriam tells Mary, "Any ladle's sweet that dishes out the gravy"). Of course, this is not to suggest the presence of a consistently subversive or independent feminine consciousness in *The Women*, but rather that the monolithic control masculinity supposedly exercises is anything but complete.

Throughout *The Women*, characters specifically warn each other against the company of other women; Mrs. Moorehead [Lucile Watson], the mother of heroine Mary Haines [Norma Shearer], visibly shudders at her daughter's friends and literally fumigates the room after they leave. Nancy Blake [Florence Nash], a self-described aberration of nature, an "old maid," serves as a one-woman chorus against women "who are not content to be women." Yet if the explicit project of *The Women* is comically to present the



Rosalind Russell, Joan Crawford

"truth" about women's relationships with one another, the film nevertheless indirectly dramatizes the potential power of feminine alliances. These alliances are transitory and forged against other women to be sure, yet they only reflect the ideological project that would posit women as each other's worst enemies precisely in order to diffuse the implicit threat suggested by the mere presence of so many articulate, powerful, and glamorous women.⁶

While *The Women* "naturalizes" the inequities of the power relations that exist between men and women, it all the more clearly foregrounds and satirizes the economic power relations that exist between women. While Jane



[Muriel Hutchinson], Mary's maid, may sympathize with her mistress' marital difficulties, the point is clearly made that the Haines' divorce could mean the end of her job. Among the working-class women that populate the film are a number of black women who are not only subject to the whims of the rich but are also engaged in an economic dynamic with other working-class women: Olive [Theresa Harris], an employee at Sydney's, wryly comments on a rich dowager's command to give her lapdog bottled mineral water; Lulu [Butterfly McQueen] must haggle with Crystal for a fairer wage after being ordered to cancel her own date to cook dinner for Stephen Haines. Indeed, the film reflects

an unmistakable sympathy for the shop-girls, servants, and beauticians who are as actively engaged in the exchange of information and the dissemination and implementation of power as are their employers.

The Women's dark and horrific inverse, in fact, can be found in Cukor's later film, *Gaslight*, which dramatizes the life-threatening and debilitating effects of isolation on a woman who has been sequestered by, and entirely subjected to, a sadistic masculine manipulation masquerading as marital concern. Years after the murder of her beloved aunt, Paula Alquist [Ingrid Bergman], briefly and joyfully recalls her aunt in the figure of Lady Dalroy. Gregory [Charles Boyer], after successfully undermining Paula's attempts to re-enter the social circle of Lady Dalroy, further denies her the company of Miss Thwaites (whose inveterate gossip threatens his plans), and relegates her, instead, to the sole company of a deaf cook and a resentful, incommunicative housemaid.⁷

If an emergent feminine discourse is traditionally perceived as dangerous and threatening, one obvious strategy to

5. Clarens defends Cukor's world as "not the unbalanced over-literal no-man's land of soap opera" and isolates an over-riding "educative" male voice in *The Women* that supposedly corrects an "unbalanced" feminine universe. See Clarens 10. David Miller's 1956 disappointing musical remake, *The Opposite Sex*, with June Allyson and Joan Collins, includes men.

6. An exception to the cut-throat nature that characterizes relationships between women can be found in those that exist between mother and daughter. Mrs. Moorehead and Mary watch themselves clown together on a home movie; little Mary [Virginia Weidler] laughs and jokes with her mother as they film each other horse-back riding. Although these activities are meant to compensate for the father's absence, each of the mother/daughter scenes is characterized by a sense of intimacy as women share confidences, and as well by a sense of play and physical pleasure (Little Mary murmurs to her mother as they cuddle in bed that one of the good things about Daddy being gone is that you "get to sleep with Mother").

7. More than fifty years after the release of Cukor's film, Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) provides a murderous echo to *The Women*, with a narrative that sets women against women. Again, the patriarch remains a shadowy figure, and wit, gossip,

diffuse the power or effect of women talking to other women would be to denigrate such discourse either as gossip or idle chatter, or to identify it as lies. Indeed the film encourages such a judgement (epitomized in the destructive figure of Sylvia Fowler [Rosalind Russell]), and women's voices are often pitched purposely to suggest the inarticulate chattering of animals. Nevertheless, throughout *The Women* words are wielded with deadly efficiency and precision.⁸ Anita Loos, who completed the final version of the screenplay with Jane Murfin, commented on this aspect of the script: "It's always been men who find *The Women* offensive."⁹ Loos' comment underscores the way in which women's ability to master and deploy speech provokes disgust, and indeed, is often violently resented by male characters in other Cukor films such as *Born Yesterday* (1950).

In *The Women* specific feminine experiences are the central subject of dramas that the characters themselves continually re-enact for one another. Olga [Dennie Moore] performs the scene of Crystal's seduction of Stephen Haines for Mary, Jane performs the fight scene between Mary and Stephen, playing both roles with such emotional clarity that Maggie [Mary Cecil] comments on her acting ability, and Pat [Virginia Grey] applauds Crystal's bravura performance during a telephone conversation with Haines. Women recount the stories of their lives, exchange confidences, and watch each other to the point of obsessiveness, and while it is true that the characters continually invoke men, and that these performances signify the presence of men, the women's attention remains entirely focused upon one another.

Mary Haines and Peggy Day [Joan Fontaine] are nominally the "good women" who are to be rewarded for their faith in romantic love. However, the ludicrous exaggeration of the scenes in which Mary and Peggy are reconciled with their husbands only emphasizes that these reconciliations are but instances of intense wish-fulfillment. Peggy's ecstatic telephone conversation with her controlling husband comes only after she herself reviews the grim options facing a single pregnant woman (Fontaine's powerfully tremulous performance led to her role in *Rebecca* and indeed to the development of a "strong" persona as screen victim). By the end of *The Women*, Mary too rushes to stand by her man, but only after she has shed all of her notions about the "naturalness" of marriage.

Crystal's contrary status as a "bad" woman is complicated by the "doubling" of her character in Miriam Aarons [Paulette Goddard], the tough chorus girl who counsels Mary on sexual tactics and survival. Both Crystal (the leopard) and Miriam (the fox) are positioned outside of the domesticated or tame menagerie associated with the other female characters. The showdown between the "good" and the "bad" woman is evenly matched, and Mary's patrician superiority loses the first round to Crystal's streetwise cool.¹⁰ Finally, even Crystal's final exit can hardly be characterized by a sense of retribution or final defeat since she is given the definitive last word.¹¹

Mrs. Moorehead explains to Mary that while women may have the ability to reinvent themselves, men can only

see a new self "reflected in some woman's eyes." Indeed, women exercise power using the options available to them, by either re-inventing themselves through fantasy or through fashion.¹² Far from being passive receptacles who simply reflect male desire or anxiety as glamorous, fetishized objects, female characters are continually at work shoring up, reinscribing, or controlling their positions as objects of desire. Even if the issues of feminine desire and sexuality remain buried, they nonetheless invariably re-emerge in a torrential flood of language.

Sidney's Beauty Salon becomes a site not only for women to talk about, but to watch other women. The "Jungle Red" nailpolish that circulates within this enclosed female community acquires meaning and significance, not merely as a violent and fetishized image, but as a glamorous extension that empowers women to move further away from the domestic enclosure such as it is inhabited by Mary Haines and Peggy Day, and closer to the dangerous, untamed sexuality of Crystal Allen, whose gaze, when trained upon the masculine subject, is reported to have the illuminating power of a "searchlight."

While Cukor's films remains disappointing for its overt endorsement of patriarchal values, pleasure is nonetheless evoked by the predominance of women who are as obsessed with looking as they are with speaking. Indeed, women scrutinize each other, eye to eye, under the magnifying glasses at the beauty salon, and Sylvia Fowler actually wears a suit emblazoned with appliqué eyes. In the end, Crystal Allen turns her "searchlight" eyes upon Mary Haines, in a gesture of defiance that threatens, if only momentarily, the passivity which defines the domestic concerns of the narrative.

slander, and glamour are the only weapons available to the women in lieu of economic or political power. Unlike *The Women*, however, with its comic resolution, female powerlessness is finally substantiated in *Raise the Red Lantern* as the enactment of violent, patriarchal law that results in the pathetic death of Yan'er, the horrific execution of Meishan, and Songlian's lonely flight into madness.

8. Referring to the terrifying speed and ferocity with which they delivered their lines, Cukor said of his actresses, "I think they were all on a horror kick." He was especially impressed with Russell's emerging talents as a comic actress. See Lambert 138.

9. Gary Carey, *Anita Loos: A Biography*. (New York: Knopf, 1988) 184.

10. This was the only time Norma Shearer and Joan Crawford appeared together in the same film, and indeed part of the resonance of their performances in *The Women* comes from the intersection of these roles with their own screen personas and their respective positions of power at the studio. Shearer continued to wield power at MGM even after the death of her husband, Irving Thalberg, and Crawford had been labelled "box-office poison" by the industry in 1938.

11. Cukor's film has certainly softened Clare Boothe's bitter attack on the privileged women of an idle class, and indeed, Shearer's performance is a study in elegant restraint. Nevertheless, Cukor agrees that the wronged heroine, Mary Haines, ("So worthy and self-righteous! And with nobility on her side!") is far less interesting than his "monstrous" characters played by Russell and Crawford. See Lambert 136-137.

12. The film includes an extended colour-sequence of a fashion show (not directed by Cukor) attended by most of the major characters.

THE COLLAPSE OF FANTASY

MASCULINITY
IN THE WESTERNS OF
ANTHONY MANN

by Douglas Pye

Anthony's last great Western, *Man of the West* (1958), opens with a credit sequence which almost archetypally invokes one of the central images of the tradition, the lone horseman in a Western landscape. The credits announce 'Gary Cooper,' 'Man of the West' and successive shots bring the rider closer: a man clearly in repose, at ease in the saddle, but solitary, self-contained. It seems effortlessly to conjure up the whole tradition in which the fantasy of such a figure is pivotal.

In immediate contrast the first post-credit sequence then presents a bustling Western town into which Cooper rides and here, increasingly, Mann draws on other aspects of Cooper's persona: he is affable, helpful, hesitant, the character apparently slightly ill at ease in town, out of place. As he prepares for a train journey, he changes his clothes, packs his guns into a carpet bag; he is then comically terrified of the train and fits with great difficulty into the cramped seats. Within a short time the train has been attacked and Cooper is left by the trackside with two companions as the train disappears. Now a third persona gradually appears. Approaching the apparently abandoned farm where they will seek shelter he takes off the coat and tie, returning to the more familiar appearance of the Westerner and we shortly learn that he was once a member of the murderous Tobin gang.

The juxtaposition of images of the hero is unusually extreme and implicitly poses one of the film's central questions — what is the relationship between these versions of the same man? How are the archetypal Westerner, the hick and the ex-outlaw connected? This is perhaps the most schematic representation of a concern with the nature and identity of the Western hero which runs right through Mann's Westerns and particularly, in addition to *Man of the West*, the five extraordinary films starring James Stewart, a collaboration between director and star comparable in achievement to Stewart's films with Hitchcock during the same period. In fact, to borrow something Andrew Britton has suggested about Hitchcock, these films *are* popular narratives *and* yet at the same time *are about* the conventions of such narratives. In particular, like Hitchcock, in exploring the identity of the familiar action hero, Mann also analyses and problematises assumptions about masculinity which are inherent in popular genres, developing as he does so a substantial critique of central aspects of the traditional Western.

It is striking though how little the Western has been discussed in these terms. This may be part of the wider phenomenon: that the genre has been very much on a critical back-burner in recent years after being central to genre studies in the period roughly 1965-75. Other genres —



Anthony Mann directs James Stewart in *The Man from Laramie*

notably melodrama and film noir — have become the focus of study in terms of gender and representation and this work has changed the face of film theory and criticism. Even the continuing strand of work on the Western has had little to say about gender, with the exception of one or two writers such as Steve Neale and, most recently, Martin Pumphrey, whose splendidly titled article 'Why do cowboys wear hats in the bath?'¹, was my own impetus to re-scan the field. One effect has been that the Western seems like another country in genre criticism, barely integrated into wider discussions of representation in 40's and 50's Hollywood. To give one symptomatic example: Joan Mellen's feminist survey of masculinity in American film, *Big Bad Wolves* (1978)², refers to a few high profile Westerns of the 1950s but contains not a single reference to Anthony Mann.

In studies of the Western itself, Mann has long been seen as central to the new inflections of the genre that characterised the post-war period — the 'superwestern,' 'adult' or 'psychological' Western which was variously celebrated or criticised for bringing new social and psychological themes to the old formula. These were often films with more problematic heroes and more critical attitudes to American civilization than had been common. It is a period which John Cawelti describes as shifting the genre from the myth of foundations to a concern with social transition, the passing of the Old West into modern society and the Western hero's increasingly complex and ambiguous relationship to that process.³

These are very much Mann's concerns. There is a familiar and to an extent justified tendency in Mann criticism to characterise his handling of the Western as 'mythic' and 'archetypal' and to see the heroes as overreachers, finally 'brought low,' as Jim Kitses suggests.⁴ But recurrently those tendencies and that motif are mapped on to a narrative in which social change is rapidly taking place and the old frontier days are passing or have passed. Particularly clearly in the films entirely scripted by Borden Chase, *Bend of the River* and *The Far Country*, but also elsewhere, as in *Man of the West*, there is a sense of 'stages of society,' from the most primitive to the much more advanced, rapidly succeeding each other. The films take on the implications of this situation for the Western hero as few others in the period do.

The Far Country is in some ways the clearest, most schematic, treatment of these issues. The film begins in Seattle in 1896 — on the north-west seaboard and at the very end of the familiar historical period of the Western. The action moves, with the arrival of Jeff/James Stewart, north to the gold fields and out of the United States. Jeff is constantly reminded by his partner, Ben/Walter Brennan, of the farm in Utah they have agreed to buy together but Jeff's trajectory is to push on from the disappearing frontier of westward expansion, to look for new frontiers, even beyond the USA. His movement is in line with the traditional motif of the hero's escape West at the end of Western narratives but the film develops that movement to its logical conclusion. Dawson, the location of the gold camp where the film's action climaxes, is geographically a cul-de-sac, with only one way in and out — Two Mile Pass, where gold min-

ers are ambushed and murdered as the forces of corruption follow the discovery of gold. Jeff stands by while the gold camp is taken over and his unshakeable refusal to acknowledge any human responsibility becomes increasingly disturbing, its perversity underlined by his commitment to Ben. Characteristically he searches for another way out of Dawson to avoid the pass — continuing to look for ways of evading both social obligation and confrontation. But as he and Ben launch the raft that Jeff believes will enable him to escape by river, they are attacked, Jeff is wounded and Ben killed.

In its context, the implications of the shooting as the climax of Jeff's insistence on not getting involved seem paradoxical. On the one hand it seems to confirm Jeff's aspiration to isolation and emotional invulnerability: if it hadn't been for Ben, who inadvertently gave away their escape plan, Jeff would have been clear. On the other hand, with the full force of Jeff's commitment to Ben so clear in the film, it emphasises the perversity and destructiveness — finally the sheer impossibility — of his denial of human contact. The hero is in a dead end at several levels. The geography dramatises both the cul-de-sac the character has reached, and Mann's analysis of the situation of the Western hero. The social/historical dimensions of the film give the drama of the hero its significant context: the end of the traditional frontier and a remorseless social process in which the cooperative individual enterprise of the original Dawson community is overrun by corrupt exploitation of law and ruthless entrepreneurial capitalism. 'The blessings of civilization' from which Doc Boone helps to save Dallas and Ringo at the end of John Ford's *Stagecoach* will inevitably eradicate the positive but defenceless values of pioneer communities. The hero's dead-end is personal and historical: the possibilities of the unexplored West are no longer imaginatively available. The end of the film, after Jeff has acted against the villains and seems to have saved the 'nice people' and be poised to settle, stands in apparent tension with that gloomy scenario, but it has its own complexities and I will return to it in relation to other endings, later. For the moment I want to stress the film's analysis of the essentially untenable position of its hero. Jeff repeatedly asserts a kind of transcendence, but the transcendence available for heroes in earlier forms of the genre, of confident action and perfected moral identity, is precisely what Mann denies.

We might briefly juxtapose what Mann is doing here

1. Martin Pumphrey, 'Why do cowboys wear hats in the bath?' *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 31, no. 3. See also Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle,' *Screen and Genre*. British Film Institute, 1980; and, for a brief discussion of the representation of men in Anthony Mann, Paul Willemsen, 'Anthony Mann: Looking at the Male,' *Framework* 15/16/17, Summer 1981.

2. Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves*. Elm Tree Books, 1978.

3. John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*. University of Chicago Press, 1976, page 247.

4. Jim Kitses, *Horizons West*. Thames and Hudson, 1969, page 35. Kitses' account of Mann's films remains indispensable but it appeared before issues of gender and representation had become central to genre study.



Man of the West:
the Oedipal triangle.



The hero resorts
to the violence
he has renounced.

with John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946) in which Ford is still able (just!) to dramatise both a serene hero, who internalises the wilderness/civilization opposition without apparent significant strain and an affirmative vision of a new, lovely, American civilization growing in the West, made possible by the hero's action. But with characteristic complexity, Ford achieves these affirmative elements with some strain in the film as a whole, by, for instance, killing off the threats to the emergent community and, more significantly for this context, by displacing the more problematic divisions between wilderness and civilization from Wyatt/Henry Fonda on to Doc Holliday/Victor Mature, who is also among the characters finally killed. Tellingly, Doc also becomes the focus for the attention of the two traditional and opposed women, the bar girl and the straight girl — in the case of *My Darling Clementine*, the girl from the East.

In Mann's films the contradictions that Ford displaces on to Doc Holliday are focused on the hero himself and become dramatised very intensely as a psychic split, impossible to resolve. The terms of that division are essentially traditional. They are presented as competing images of masculinity: on the one hand the claims of settlement, civilization and social responsibility, and on the other of wandering, wilderness and independence. These are of course obsessive oppositions in American culture, endlessly recycled, and have produced recurrent structures of character and situation which enact the contradictions in various ways. In an account of how genre films negotiate such contradictions, Robin Wood wittily sums up the familiar types and the dilemmas they implicitly dramatise:

The ideal male: the virile adventurer, the potent, untrammelled man of action. The ideal female: wife and mother, perfect companion, the endlessly dependable mainstay of hearth and home.

Since these combine into a couple of quite staggering incompatibility, each has his or her shadow.

The settled husband/father, dependable but dull.

The erotic woman/adventuress, gambling lady, saloon 'entertainer' /fascinating but dangerous, liable to betray the hero or turn into a black panther.⁵

The contradictions are evident enough, together with the male fantasy inherent in the 'ideal man' and the fear of impotence that haunts the hero threatened by marriage. In terms of masculinity the implicit debate is clear: can a man be a man and settled; or, as Martin Pumphrey puts it, 'How far can masculinity survive contact with the feminine sphere?'⁶ If the fear of impotence is one central issue, Ford's Doc Holliday points to a different inflection of the dilemma — the self-destructive, corrosive impact of the division as it is internalised. The impossibility of resolving these dilemmas is rooted, of course, in the power of a fantasy of male independence. Mann's films are still gripped by the power of that fantasy but its implications are exposed with remark-

able clarity and intensity.

In principle, the situation of the hero would suggest that a choice is available: for instance, as in *Bend of the River*, to settle and become a farmer, or as in *The Far Country*, to refuse that option. In many versions of the Western, the hero makes such a choice, and either rides on as the film ends, or is poised to enter settlement. The contradictions inherent in the hero's position are in effect papered over. But in Mann, not only does choice hardly seem an appropriate word to use, but each of the apparent options is presented in ways which undercut any residual positive connotations the genre might allow.

Life outside settlement is presented recurrently as negative in the extreme. Jeff's drive for independence in *The Far Country* is self-destructive and perverse; Howie Kemp in *The Naked Spur* has become a bounty hunter; Glyn McClintock in *Bend of the River* was a raider on the Kansas/Missouri border; Link Jones in *Man of the West* was a murderous outlaw. The traditional life of independence is characterised as savage, neurotic, regressive. Robin Wood's 'ideal man,' a fantasy figure of supreme completeness, is transformed into a nightmare of psychological trauma, violence and hysteria. The fantasy of preserving male independence by moving on is not only no longer available — it has become almost psychotic.

The analysis of the hero in these terms is intensified by the use of the motif of the double, one of the most familiar dramatic structures in male-centred movies, but one capable of inflections with very different ideological implications. In its simplest forms the relationship between the two figures is one of opposition: hero and villain. The hero can vanquish the villain, whether in the Western or the story of investigation, and restore moral order. It becomes increasingly complex as the relationship is dramatised not just by opposition but by similarity: the hero and villain constructed as versions of each other or as bound in a mutually defining relationship: two sides of the same coin. This can take many forms. In the Western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* dramatises particularly clearly that the hero cannot retain his power and authority after the villain has been killed: in killing Liberty Valance Tom Doniphon writes himself out of the future. Equally, the villain can become in the film's symbolic structure a projection of forces within but repressed by the hero. Central relationships in Mann's films seem recurrently of this kind, a second man created as a more or less clear version of the hero, linked by blood and/or background (*Winchester 73*, *Bend of the River*, *Man of the West*) and sometimes given parallels in personality — the relaxed and humorous as well as ruthless and violent aspects of the hero's character (*Bend of the River*, *The Far Country*, *The Man from Laramie*).

The link between the literal level of the narrative and these less tangible levels is perhaps clearest in *Bend of the*

5. 'Ideology, Genre, Auteur.' Film Comment 13, No. 1, Jan./Feb. 1977. Reprinted in *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry K. Grant, University of Texas Press, 1986.

6. Martin Pumphrey, entry on Masculinity, *BFI Companion to the Western*, ed. E. Buscombe, 1991.

7. Jim Kitses, page 44.

River and *Man of the West*. In *Bend of the River*, Glyn McLintock, searching for a way around the mountains for the wagon train he is guiding, comes across Emerson Cole/Arthur Kennedy about to be hanged for horse stealing. The link between them is made visually in a zip pan and in Glyn's fingering of his own neck (it later transpires that he once narrowly escaped hanging). The men have identical backgrounds as raiders on the Kansas/Missouri border. It is as though, in seeking to evade not only the mountain but his own past, Glyn conjures up the image of that past. In *Man of the West* it is implied that the outlaw gangs are things of the past. But as Link Jones leaves the town on the train, his old gang re-emerge. The sense of them as ghosts called up, as it were, by Link losing his precarious place in civilization is almost tangible as they appear out of the darkness in the shack to which Link takes Billie/Julie London and Sam Beasley/Arthur O'Connell after the robbery. In each case the hero has to confront and destroy these figures from his past, the process one of both disavowal and, I think, self destruction. He has, in other words, to deny and disavow his kinship with the double by killing him, in order to assert his own difference, but in killing him the hero is forced to use the violence that is inherent in him, against a figure who is a version of himself.

The end of *Man of the West* is particularly rich in that the figure Link has to kill has been a 'father' to him and in that the final sections have a much more explicit sexual dimension than the other films. When Link returns from Lassoo after killing the remaining gang members, he finds that Doc Tobin/Lee J. Cobb has raped Billie. Doc's action and what follows has a complex significance. Doc sees Billie as Link's woman (his 'son's' woman) so to rape her is both to revenge himself for Link's treachery and to act out his own patriarchal authority, denying his 'son' sexual independence. Link finally has to kill his 'father' because he is evil but also, in the logic of the relationship, to achieve independence and to replace him. It is an act of disavowal (I'm not like you) which is given its force by the kinship the film has dramatised. But to give that disavowal its full impact he must reject a sexual interest in Billie in order to return to his wife. The film begins by giving us Gary Cooper as 'Man of the West,' raises questions about that image and ends, as a number of writers have suggested, by offering another possibility — that Doc Tobin was the 'Man of the West.' Yet if we pursue the logic of the film's symbolic structure, perhaps this is not an alternative identification of the title figure; rather the implication may be that what is inherent in that serene and solitary figure in the credits is this crazed old man, the embodiment of a murderous patriarchal masculinity.

Clearly these representations of the hero cannot simply be reduced to issues of character. A major determinant is the historical setting. The fantasy has soured because the period of the frontier is passing. With male independence a nightmare and the safety valve of the West no longer imaginatively available, settlement cannot be evaded.

Indeed Mann's heroes invariably end the films framed with a woman and apparently poised to settle. But in a variety of ways the films also put question marks over this reso-

lution. There is no alternative to settlement but the fantasy that these figures can, like Wister's *The Virginian*, keep their identity and strength as Westerners while contentedly and successfully settling, is also strongly undercut. Several strategies are at work here, differently articulated in each film. *Bend of the River* is perhaps the most apparently affirmative of the endings, with the wagons containing winter supplies finally reaching the fertile Oregon valley and being greeted by 'nice people.' But here the rhetoric of the happy ending, linked as it has been throughout to the sententious moralising and 'happy valley' imagery used by the Jay C. Flippen character, in itself gives the last scenes a somewhat illusory feel. At the same time, as in *The Far Country*, the movement of exploitation and violence into the area with the discovery of gold suggests a remorseless social process from which the settlers cannot remain detached. In *The Far Country* and *Winchester 73*, James Stewart is left respectively with the characters played by Corinne Calvet and Shelley Winters. In neither case is a relationship earlier developed as a basis for the marriage the end may point to. Renee, in *The Far Country*, is a largely sexless figure referred to repeatedly by Jeff as 'Freckleface.' The incongruity of the coupling of Jeff and Renee could not be clearer. In *The Naked Spur*, where the casting of Janet Leigh and the development of the character gives Lina rather greater force and presence, Mann makes use of the ending in which the couple are seen moving further West, in this case towards California. But any positive connotations are qualified by an extraordinarily bleak final image — the couple riding away through a landscape of blighted and dead trees. *Man of the West* is a further variant. In Billie/Julie London, the film has perhaps the strongest female figure in Mann's westerns, but the possibility of a relationship developing between Link and Billie is blocked, as I have suggested, by Link's already being married. The ending, as they drive back towards the settlements, is very moving. Billie makes quite explicit the impossibility of the lovely fantasy that they might become a couple. Yet, at the same time, we never see the small settlement (referred to by Link at different points as Good Hope and Sawmill — 'five days ride West of here') where Link has married and settled. Good Hope, which is evoked but never seen, comes to seem as illusory as Lassoo, the gold rush settlement of which Doc Tobin dreams but which is revealed as a ghost town. It is as though the film is held between two illusions, two fantasies: that of perfect community and that of the wide-open, Wild West of the outlaw.

There is a third but less common ending — the death of the hero — which offers a further way of resolving (or evading) the tensions of the narrative, but Mann uses it, as far as I am aware, only in *Devil's Doorway* (1950) his first Western. The exception seems significant. The hero of the film is an Indian who has served in the US Cavalry and dies fighting the cavalry in defence of land Indians cannot now own under the Homestead Act. Jim Kitses Notes: 'As in *El Cid* ten years later, the film ends on a strange note of dark exaltation — victory through death...'⁷ The link with *El Cid* is revealing too in that there is an elegiac quality mingled with the exaltation in each ending. It is this possibility that Sam Peckinpah repeatedly exploits in the Western, but whereas

the affirmation of doomed romantic individualism is central to Peckinpah's world, it has no place in Mann's. Mann's major Westerns have very little of the elegiac about them.

The sense, then, we get of these figures is of men trapped within and struggling to escape from a narrow and stifling, traditional definition of masculinity as held between two incompatible forces. Whether they wish to pull free of human contact or reject their anti-social past in order to settle, they are forced to exist in a destructive force field, pushed and pulled between magnetic poles which simultaneously attract and repel.

To discuss the films in terms of choice (or lack of choice) for the hero and to pose the issues in terms of gender roles is also to open up questions of genre. In recent years the genre that has been the focus of discussion of gender representation and ideological entrapment in destructive social roles has been domestic melodrama. If these debates have centred on feminist readings and on representations of women, the great male centred melodramas of the fifties (films directed by Sirk, Ray, Minnelli among others) have also received significant attention. Laura Mulvey comments about Sirk's *Tarnished Angels* and *Written on the Wind*: 'Roger Schuman...and Kyle Hadley... (both played by Robert Stack) are tortured and torn by the mystique of masculinity, haunted by phallic obsessions and fear of impotence. In these two films Sirk provides an extremely rare epitaph, an insight into men as victims of patriarchal society. He shows castration anxiety, not (as is common) personified by a vengeful woman but presented *dreadfully* and without mediation.'⁸

This is the terrain of what Michael Walker calls 'the melodrama of passion' as opposed to the 'melodrama of action' represented by the Hollywood action genres. Melodramas of passion are concerned 'not with the external dynamic of action but with the internal traumas of passion (the emotions).'⁹ The categories, as Walker recognises, are not entirely clear-cut and it seems to me that Mann's Westerns, in their focus on the unstable and tortured masculinity of their heroes, demand to be seen alongside — indeed as part of — the great fifties cycle of male melodramas. Like the protagonists of melodrama, Mann's heroes are in a sense victims, lacking the self-knowledge either of the traditional Westerner or of the tragic hero and enacting a drama of intractable situations. They also share with so many of the women of melodrama (and some men — see, for instance, Dave/Frank Sinatra in *Some Came Running*) an apparent choice of two paths, in which synthesis is impossible but each seems equally terrible. The dilemma seems insistently: must choose, must lose. Like their contemporaries in Melodrama, Mann's protagonists are prisoners of a masculinity coded in hopelessly contradictory ways.

Thomas Schatz¹⁰ distinguishes between genres of contested and those of uncontested space: those like the Western and some other action genres in which control of the setting is largely what is at stake; and those like melodrama and the musical in which a stable cultural setting exists and established society exerts a powerful and constricting grip on the characters. One of the glories of Mann's films is the use of landscape as setting for individual conflict but insistently landscape is given symbolic significance that

precisely mirrors the hero's inner state. The conflicts are less between external historical forces for control of the setting, as they are in many Westerns, and are more embodiments of the hero's internal struggle. Kiteses again sums up the effect in his description of *Winchester 73*: 'The terrain is so coloured by the action that it finally seems an inner landscape, the unnatural world of a disturbed mind.' In this respect too, Mann inflects the Western towards the motifs and structures of melodrama, in which psychological dilemmas are so often the internalised forms of ideological contradictions and in which setting and dramatic structure externalise both the psychological tensions and the competing ideological forces. There is an urgent need to re-integrate the Western (and not just Anthony Mann) into the wider field of genre studies.

The question that remains at the end of these extraordinary movies is often what state the hero is in. To return to Jim Kiteses' observation that Mann's heroes are 'brought low' — after the climactic conflicts these men often seem drained. As Kiteses writes: 'We must ask what kind of success it is that accounts for the destruction of a father or a brother, and how this equips the character for a role in the community.' If the violence is a kind of exorcism, it also leaves the question of what is left. The exhaustion and even despair that seems present in the heroes at the end of some of the movies cannot simply be read, in the context of the films as a whole, as a temporary state. *The Naked Spur* is particularly explicit about the state of the hero. Howie Kemp maintains his hysterical insistence on pulling Robert Ryan's body out of the river for the bounty almost to the end before collapsing with an almost desperate cry into the arms of Lina/Janet Leigh. The pull of nihilistic isolation and the fear of commitment are powerfully present to the end.

But if the hero seems almost destroyed, it is important to ask whether the 'destruction' carries only negative connotations. It is clear that much of the intensity of these films, as of the contemporary male melodrama, springs from a critical engagement with versions of masculinity deeply rooted in the culture — and that the tensions inherent in this field do not readily admit of resolution. Mann's films, however, are particularly clear-sighted in their demolition of the two fantasies that are central to Western resolutions: the fantasy of 'the ideal man' and the fantasy of such a figure contentedly settled. If at the end of the films the heroes often seem deflated, drained, and if the endings are less than uplifting (even at times bleak) these things may connote not, in a negative, regretful, elegiac sense, the end of the Western hero but — positively and remarkably — the collapse of fantasy.

8. Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama,' *Movie* 25, 1978, page 54.

9. Michael Walker, 'Melodrama and the American Cinema,' *Movie* 29/30, 1982 page 17.

10. Thomas Schatz, 'Hollywood Genres', Random House, 1981

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"I'm not the sort of person men marry"

MONSTERS, QUEERS
AND
HITCHCOCK'S *REBECCA*

by Rhona J. Berenstein

There is an early scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) in which Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier) asks a young woman¹ (Joan Fontaine) to marry him. She offers Max a rather odd response to his query: "I'm not the sort of person men marry." Her comment incites at least two questions which are central to this narrative, to this tale of female desires. First, what sort of person do men marry? And second, why isn't Fontaine's character of that sort?

It is the latter question which sparks my urge to rewrite Fontaine's strange answer to Max as: "I'm not the sort of person who marries men." While such a transformation of dialogue can be cavalierly effected some fifty-one years after *Rebecca's* release, Fontaine's affiliation with queer women — women whose sexualities defy the conventions of 1930s and 1940s heterosexuality — is implied throughout the film. It is the tracing of the clues which point again and again to a queer sub-text aligned with monstrosity that will be outlined in the following pages.

Sue-Ellen Case has written that the "queer is the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny. Like the Phantom of the Opera, the queer dwells underground, below the operatic overtones of the

1. Fontaine's character remains nameless throughout the narrative. Unlike the first Mrs. de Winter whose name serves both as a character's forename and as the film's title, the second Mrs. de Winter relies upon her marital appellation for identification. As a result, I will alternately refer to her as Fontaine as the second Mrs. de Winter.



dominant; frightening to look at, desiring, as it plays its own organ, producing its own music."² Case's queers — and her elaboration of queer theory — are associated with "the idiomatically-proscribed position of same-sex desire" (3). Queerness is characterized by the breaking of boundaries, by an incision into the ontological justification and valorization of heterosexuality. Whereas for Case queers revel in same-sex desire, in this discussion of Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, the term "queer" will be applied both to the text's circulation of lesbian desires and to its movements between same-sex and other-sex desires. "Queer" thus refers to the same-sex components of the lesbian and bisexual desires exhibited by *Rebecca*'s heroines. It also refers to the disruptive qualities of the movement between same-sex and other-sex desires in bisexual examples.³ In writing of the lesbian specters that dwell in Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963), Patricia White asserts: "The film, resisting the visualization of desire between women, displaces that desire onto the level of the supernatural..." (157). Like the ghost story described by White, Hitchcock's Gothic romance sets the terms for a queer attraction and displaces that attraction onto the levels of metaphor and supernature. In applying White's comment to *Rebecca*, a close reading of the queer desires which punctuate that film demands both tracing the movie's elaboration of female subjectivity and exploring its construction of Rebecca's haunting monstrosity.

A Gothic romance is not an unusual text in which to seek and find a heroine. Like other women's films of the 1940s, *Rebecca* focuses on the interrogation and representation of female subjectivity, and it appeals to female spectators. As a Gothic narrative, it also includes the elaboration of nightmare states, an attention to the protagonist's fears, and the representation of evil.⁴ In *Rebecca*, a wealthy widower, Maxim de Winter, meets a younger woman (Fontaine) who is visiting Monte Carlo as a paid companion to an American, Mrs. Van Hopper (Florence Bates). Overhearing one of her employer's conversations, Fontaine learns that Maxim's wife drowned at sea the previous year. Fontaine and Max spend time together in Monte Carlo and, although he remains a figure marked by restraint and mystery, he proposes to her. After their honeymoon, they return to his estate in England: Manderley. Fontaine feels out of her element amid the wealth and splendour of her new home. Her displacement is compounded by her belief that her predecessor, Rebecca, still holds her husband's and the staff's (especially, the housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers') loyalties, and that she will never be able to measure up to the first Mrs. de Winter. Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson) is especially cruel to the new bride, pointing out her inadequacies on a regular basis, and frequently asserting Rebecca's superiority to her successor. Eventually, however, Fontaine stands up to Danvers and takes her proper place as mistress of the mansion. Soon after, Rebecca's boat and body are discovered at sea. Maxim had falsely identified the woman's body that lies in the family crypt. In a dramatic confession, Max admits to his bride that he didn't love Rebecca, that, in fact, he hated her, and that they fought bitterly the night she died. Asserting that she fell and struck her head, thereby killing herself, Maxim admits that he placed her body in the

boat, sailed it out, and sank it. The revelation that he didn't love Rebecca thrills Fontaine. The remainder of the film is spent investigating Rebecca's death. When a London doctor informs Max and the authorities that his first wife had cancer, her demise is dismissed as suicide. Hearing of Rebecca's illness and the suicide theory, Danvers sets the mansion on fire, destroying most of the de Winter possessions and killing herself.

According to Diane Waldman, "the central feature of the Gothics is ambiguity, the hesitation between two possible interpretations of events by the protagonist...[I]n the Gothic, this hesitation is experienced by a character...who is female."⁵ In true Gothic fashion, *Rebecca* traces Fontaine's hesitations, her troubling questions which punctuate the film with ambiguity and ambivalence: Does Maxim love his second wife, or does he not? Will he always be preoccupied with Rebecca, or will he leave her in the past? Does he love Rebecca, or does his preoccupation suggest something other than love? Can Fontaine fulfil the expectations he has of a wife, or will she forever remain a child in his eyes? On the surface, these questions suggest that her husband serves as the focus of her inquiries, as the principal sign of ambiguity, since it is his actions and motives which Fontaine has trouble deciphering. These queries are, however, more complex than a surface reading would allow. Fontaine's efforts to find out more about Maxim's moods and feelings, to understand him better, are also attempts to find out about another woman, Rebecca. Rebecca is an elusive, sexually attractive, and powerful figure in this film — even in her absence. The second Mrs. de Winter's fascination with her predecessor permeates the text, thereby causing Fontaine to spend the course of the film investigating questions posed in relation to two characters: Max and Rebecca. Thus, although Fontaine and Max's coupling is marked by ambiguity, the text is equally haunted by an ambiguous representation of Rebecca.

Rebecca contributes to the ambiguities in Fontaine and Maxim's relationship by intervening in that relationship. She mediates, and in certain instances obstructs, the film's primary heterosexual couple. A close look at two early scenes indicates that Rebecca is a force that Fontaine and Max contend with, even in her absence. For example, in the scene directly following Fontaine's opening voice-over, Maxim meets his second wife. The ghost of Rebecca is figured as the crashing wave to which there was a dissolve from her bedroom window. The sequence begins with a high angle panning shot of the ocean which then moves up the side of a cliff and rests on a figure (Maxim) standing on the cliff's edge. There is a cut to an extreme close-up of Max's face as he stares at the ocean. As he begins to step forward, the music reaches a crescendo. It ends abruptly and a female voice is heard shouting: "No, stop!" Maxim turns his head in the direction from which the voice came and there is a cut to a long shot of him in the foreground, a woman in the mid-ground further down the hill, and the ocean on the left of the screen.

Until this point, both the shot constructions (framing, angles, etc.), as well as Max's physical posture, direction of his gaze, and general expression, suggest that it is towards the ocean, towards Rebecca who is repeatedly associated

with water throughout the film, that he is geared. He peers at the sea, he steps towards it, and he seems to float over it due to the high angle of the shot. Once Fontaine's voice interrupts his reverie, however, the orientation of the scene shifts. He turns to face her. The configuration of the long shot suggests that Max and Fontaine are simultaneously aligned with each other, while their bodies remain oriented to the ocean. It is only in the close-ups which follow this establishing shot that their bodies appear to have turned fully towards each other. For Max, this scene ends with a realignment from Rebecca to Fontaine. After yelling at his future wife and causing her to depart, there is a cut to a close-up of his face as he watches her leave. He turns to look at the water and turns again to gaze at the spot from which Fontaine departed. Finally, he exits the frame. The camera rests in this position for a few moments; the screen is filled with the ocean and the sound of crashing waves.

Fontaine and Max's first meeting ends abruptly. She is chased away, he eventually departs in her direction, and the scene closes with an image of Rebecca's metonymic stand-in: water. Rebecca's participation in this sequence is, however, suggested by more than her oceanic associations. She occupies a position on the cliff as a memory, as a figure who once stood on that precipice with her new husband. The space in which Fontaine meets Max is the space in which, we later find out, his first bride confessed horrible things to him, in which she destroyed his dreams of matrimonial bliss. On the cliff, Rebecca agreed to "play the part" of the perfect wife, but their happiness was a sham. That Maxim and Fontaine meet at the site of the destruction of his first honeymoon does not bode well for their union. Rebecca haunts this scene as an absent signifier of failed heterosexual matrimony.

In a later scene, in which Fontaine and Max stand on a Monte Carlo promontory overlooking the ocean, Rebecca mediates their coupling once again. Fontaine has just finished sketching Max and they begin to discuss Manderley and her childhood trip with her father to the region where it's located. Their discussion begins rather innocently. They mention the weather, how cold it must be in England, and how nice it is to be able to swim in the ocean. After this part of the conversation, Fontaine describes the perils of the undertow and tells of a man's drowning the previous year. Max squirms and grimaces in response to her words. He pulls away from her, as she continues: "I've never had any fear of drowning, have you?" Max pivots and turns as Fontaine continues to speak. He walks further and further into the background. Finally, Fontaine turns to where he once was, as the ocean frames her face in close-up. Eventually, he notes: "Come, I'll take you home." She nods nervously and acquiesces to his demand.

This description of the sketching scene suggests, as do later driving scenes, that whether she appears in the form of a body of water or when verbally invoked and implied, Rebecca interferes in Fontaine and Max's relationship. In this example, she intervenes in their coupling by visually enveloping them and by serving as the unnamed demon responsible for Max's altered mood. Since, near the end of the scene, both Max and Fontaine are physically positioned in

relation to the sea, and since it is that positioning which delays Fontaine's realization that she has upset him and that he has departed from her side, Rebecca intrudes by drawing Fontaine's attention away from Max. Rebecca's presence-in-absentia thus sends a troubling ripple through Max and Fontaine's early interactions. She mediates their coupling by posing a threat to it: she threatens to haunt Maxim's present in the form of memories and to irrevocably insert herself into Fontaine's life as a menacing, intruding, and attractive figure.

Fontaine's relationship to her predecessor is unique — Rebecca is not just any heroine. First of all, she never once appears in the film. Second, she's dead. Rebecca's physical absence is, however, rendered palpable and in that sense present throughout the film. The deceased Mrs. de Winter haunts *Rebecca* as a ghost, a monstrosity whose power resides in not being seen. Tania Modleski puts it well when she notes that "Rebecca herself lurks in the blind space of the film, with the result that, like the shark (in *Jaws*) and unlike the second Mrs. de Winter, she never becomes 'domesticated.'"⁶ The spectral status of Rebecca is ambiguous, since it depends simultaneously upon her figural invisibility and upon a sustained discussion of her appearance, behaviour, and corporeality. At times, the dialogue about Rebecca and a recognition of her position as the text's monster are combined. For example, when the second Mrs. de Winter asks Frank (Reginald Denny), Maxim's assistant, about his impressions of Rebecca, he responds: "I suppose she was the most beautiful creature I ever saw" (emphasis added). Later in the film when Max describes the events of the night Rebecca died, he refers to her as a "spirit" and the "devil." Each of these descriptions aids in the establishment of her monstrosity, a monstrosity that is intimately linked, especially in Frank's comment, to her abnormal body.

The construction of Rebecca as a frightening figure bears a striking similarity to the position of monsters in the classic horror film: the monster is unnatural, diseased, and often has a privileged relationship with death. Rebecca's association with this type of monstrosity is accomplished both through dialogue, such as her description as a "creature," and through metaphoric and metonymic associations of her with the unrestrained and destructive forces of nature (primarily the sea), and with the foreboding and mysterious

2. Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire," *Differences* 3:2 (Summer 1991): 3.

3. I alternate between the terms "queer" and "lesbian" in this discussion. As noted above, "queer" is meant to refer to the display of both lesbian and bisexual tendencies in Rebecca's female characters. However, in combining bisexual and homosexual proclivities in one term, the lesbian specificities of certain characters (e.g., Danvers) and of certain stereotyped behaviours (e.g., Rebecca's man-hating in the novel) go unnamed. As a result, I will use the term "lesbian" in those instances in which it is important that specifically homosexual connotations be privileged.

4. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 9-10.

5. Diane Waldman, "'At last I can tell it to someone!': Feminine Point of View and Subjectivity in the Gothic Romance Film of the 1940s," *Cinema Journal* 23:2 (Winter 1983): 31.

6. Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1988) 53.



The ball: arrival of the guests (Gladys Cooper, Nigel Bruce, Laurence Olivier).

dominance of Manderley. The mansion which rests on Manderley's grounds is, like all Gothic homesteads, haunted. It is a space repeatedly associated with Rebecca through the appearance of her initials on napkins, stationery, and other items which Fontaine stumbles upon as she moves through the house. The mansion serves both as the space which Rebecca haunts and which is her: she embodies Manderley and lurks in its dark corners. In the beginning of the film, Fontaine describes the house as "secretive and silent," terms which both personify the mansion and align it with the eternally silent, deceased Rebecca. Like the monster of classic horror, the mansion is larger than life: even the doorknobs are positioned at a height which makes Fontaine look child-like in her attempts to turn them. It is mysterious and indecipherable: Fontaine is disoriented by its spaciousness. And it is foreign, especially to Fontaine, whose socio-economic background has not prepared her for such wealth. Fontaine's relationship to her environment is, therefore, not unlike her relationship to Rebecca — a

woman who is aggrandized, whose mysteriousness haunts Fontaine, and whose social class renders her alien to her successor.

Rebecca's affinity with Manderley and nature is suggested early in the film. The movie opens with a female voice-over which accompanies a mobile camera as it moves smoothly down a winding road and around the charred remains of a mansion. Fontaine's voice describes a dream she had of returning to Manderley. She notes how nature's "long, tenacious fingers" have encroached upon the drive, how the moonlight tricks her into believing that "light came from the windows" of a house characterized by "perfect symmetry," and how, at the scene's close, she is left with the mansion's "staring walls." This sequence encapsulates two primary narrative threads which are woven rough the text. First the personification of nature ("long, tenacious fingers") and of the house ("staring walls"), and the description of the house's perfection (as Maxim later notes, everyone told him Rebecca would make the "perfect wife"), invoke

Rebecca's absent presence and imply her association with the mansion and nature. Second, Fontaine's doubling with Rebecca in this segment establishes a theme which is elaborated upon throughout the film. That doubling is implied through an ambiguous use of pronouns. Fontaine notes early in her voice-over: "[L]ike all dreamers, I was possessed of a sudden, supernatural power and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me." Later in the monologue, she asserts: "We can never go back to Manderley again, that much is certain." In referring to herself as a spirit, in introducing herself in a manner which the film overwhelmingly associates with Rebecca, Fontaine's "I" might be construed as Rebecca's as well, as a signifier of subjectivity for the absent body which haunts the remainder of the narrative. When Fontaine shifts from the pronoun "I" to "we," she shifts from a singular subjective position to a subjectivity marked as plural, and thus suggestive of a coupling. The ambiguity of her words, the uncertainty of her pronouns (which characters are they meant to refer to?), implies two possible couples: Fontaine and Max, and Fontaine and Rebecca.

That Fontaine and Rebecca's doubling and coupling are suggested at the beginning of the film is significant; not only do the doubling and coupling indicate the primacy of the women's relationship throughout *Rebecca*, but they also attest to the power of their bond to survive the end of the narrative. The remainder of the film, the part directly following Fontaine's voice-over, is a flash-back. The events represented in *Rebecca* occurred before Fontaine's introductory dream, before the opening's alignment of Fontaine with Rebecca. Their alignment survives the death and destruction elaborated upon in the film and outlasts Fontaine and Max's departure from Manderley. But it is not solely the survival of Fontaine and Rebecca's alignment which the opening dream suggests. Fontaine's compelling voice-over constructs the mansion and the woman which it represents, as figures which the second Mrs. de Winter powerfully returns to, even in her dreams. Fontaine's reverie signifies Rebecca's central position as a persistent object of fascination for her successor.

The flashback portion of the film thus functions, among other things, to establish Fontaine and Rebecca's alignment, to set the terms for a queer attraction. The shift from the opening segment to the flashback section of the narrative, is achieved through a zoom into one of the mansion's windows — the one in Rebecca's bedroom — and a dissolve to a shot of crashing waves. This transition establishes both a temporal shift and a metonymic link between Rebecca and water. The link is further established in the scene between Fontaine and Max, mentioned earlier, in which she describes the perils of the undertow and recounts that a man drowned the previous year. The ocean, characterized as dangerous and destructive is, as we later find out, home not only to this drowned man's body, but to Rebecca's as well. In this scene, and in the film as a whole, Rebecca is both represented by and resides in the ocean. She possesses a destructive and monstrous link to the forces of nature.

The queer dimensions of Rebecca's monstrosity are implied at various moments in the narrative. In a scene in

the boat-house in which Maxim reveals his true feelings for his first wife, he notes: "I never had a moment's happiness with her. She was incapable of love, or tenderness, or decency." A good portion of Olivier's dialogue is transcribed from the novel on which the film is based. However, in Daphne du Maurier's original text, Maxim goes on to articulate what is only suggested in the film: "She was not even normal."⁷ Rebecca's abnormality finds metaphoric representation in the revelation that her body was wracked by disease, by a cancer that was propelling her to a speedy death. In contrast to Max's assumption that she was pregnant, that hers was a reproductive (read, "natural") female body, Rebecca was gestating a growing tumour and not a growing child. The novel makes her reproductive abnormality more explicit. Dr. Baker, in his review of her medical records, declares: "The X-rays showed a certain malformation of the uterus, I remember, which meant she could never have had a child, but that was quite apart, it had nothing to do with the disease" (367). The deductive leap from Rebecca's abnormal reproductive system to a queer sexuality is minimal: the association of homosexuality with sterility has a long heritage. Moreover, the description of Rebecca's physical state recalls the stereotypical equation of lesbianism with an unnatural — that is, non-reproductive — female sexuality.

Rebecca's alignment with queerness is further suggested in another segment of the scene between Fontaine and Maxim in the boat-house. As Max recounts the events of their honeymoon in Monte Carlo, he tells of one of their discussions: "Do you remember that cliff where you first saw me?... That was where I found out about her.... She stood there laughing, her black hair blowing in the wind, and told me all about herself. Everything. Things I'll never tell a living soul. I wanted to kill her." Max's reaction to Rebecca's comments may refer to his horror at a confession of heterosexual infidelity. However, there is also a "coming out" quality to Max's description — he "found out about her," Rebecca told him "all about herself." This quality, combined with the unrepeatable nature of her words, suggests that hers is not a "lawless sexuality," to borrow Modleski's phrase, of a normal kind (48). An admission of heterosexual infidelity in 1940 (or in 1938 when the novel was released) may have been horrid, but it could have been revealed to "another living soul." Queer behaviour, on the other hand, was more likely to have been treated as unrepeatable, as thoroughly unutterable.

Writing of the male homosexual sub-text in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Elaine Showalter notes that "[t]he metaphors associated with Hyde are those of abnormality, criminality, disease, contagion, and death.... In the most famous code word of Victorian homosexuality, they [other male characters] find something *unspeakable* about Hyde."⁸ While *Rebecca* appeared in print and celluloid well after the end of the last century, many of the metaphors that adhere to Hyde's char-

7. Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca* (New York: Avon Books, 1938) 271.

8. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990) 112.

acter, as Showalter describes them, apply to Rebecca as well. Moreover, the unspeakable status of queerness in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* has endured well into this century, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in *Epistemology of the Closet*.⁹ That the mystique surrounding Rebecca's sexuality is characterized as unutterable, reinforces its correspondence with late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century treatments of homosexuality. Homosexuality was represented through the enforcement of a discourse of silence - it was that which was not, should not, and could not be spoken. In the novel, Rebecca's abnormal (in this instance, non-heterosexual) qualities are, however, elaborated upon in a manner which flirts with speaking the unutterable. Near the end of the book Mrs. Danvers tells Jack Favell (George Sanders), Rebecca's cousin with whom Rebecca supposedly had an affair, that she was neither in love with him nor with Maxim, and Mrs. Danvers continues: "She despised all men. She was above all that" (Du Maurier 340). Here again a stereotypical characterization of lesbians is invoked: Rebecca was a man-hater. More significant perhaps in the context of the film is the fact that Favell is played by George Sanders, an actor whose general performance style and particular character in *Rebecca* suggests a dandy, a man who bears a striking resemblance to lasting stereotypes of male homosexuals. In speaking of the 1800s, Showalter notes: "[T]he image of the English male homosexual that prevailed for much of this century was that of the effeminate aesthete or the decadent dandy..." (178). The fact that Favell, Rebecca's "decadent dandy," is the only significant male figure around whom intimations of an affair with Rebecca revolve, suggests that her heterosexual interests may not have been very serious.

The ambiguous representation of Rebecca's sexuality is compounded by an equally complex construction of her as an icon of femininity. Speaking of the novel on which the film was based, Alison Light argues that "Rebecca becomes the figure which reveals the girl's [Fontaine's] unfulfilled desires. She is what is missing from the marriage; she is body to the girl's endless cerebration, the absent centre around which the narrative and definitions of femininity turn."¹⁰ Fontaine, indeed, spends much of the film attempting to replicate the actions, decisions, and wardrobe of her predecessor. In spite of Maxim's entreaties that she remain a child and that she never wear pearls and black satin (signifiers of adulthood and of the upper class), Fontaine insists upon growing up and taking Rebecca's place — she wears pearls and black satin, she begs Max to allow her to give a costume ball, and she wears the same costume worn by Rebecca the previous year. Despite her repeated failures in becoming her predecessor, Fontaine dwells on the fact that she lacks what is attributed to Rebecca: "brains, beauty and breeding."

The ambiguities surrounding Rebecca as a model of femininity are compelling. As Light indicates, Rebecca is aligned with femininity in the novel, but she is also aligned with masculinity, as Mrs. Danvers' remarks make clear: "She had all the courage and spirit of a boy, had my Mrs. de Winter. She ought to have been a boy..." (Du Maurier 242). And as Max notes of her appearance the night she died:

"She looked like a boy in her sailing kit, a boy with a face like a Botticelli angel" (278). Fontaine's character also assumes a masculine position in the book, but one associated less with independence and beauty, as is the case with Rebecca, than with the vulnerabilities of male childhood: "I was like a little scrubby schoolboy with a passion for a sixth-form prefect" (35) and elsewhere: "I would feel like a whipping boy who must bear his master's pains" (12). It is noteworthy that the masculine traits attributed to the second Mrs. de Winter possess strong hints of male homosexuality. In the first example, Fontaine's character describes herself as a young boy attracted to an older boy. In the second, she positions herself as the victim in a male-identified s/m-type scenario. In both instances, she (as a "he") responds to men in positions of authority. The masculine traits attributed to Rebecca by Danvers are as powerful as those possessed by Fontaine's authoritative men. As Danvers notes: "She did what she liked, she lived as she liked. She had the strength of a little lion" (243). The first Mrs. de Winter's impressive status suggests that Fontaine's position in relation to Rebecca is not unlike her position vis-à-vis the prefect and the master.¹¹ Rebecca and her successor are thus aligned through their shared, yet differential, relationships to masculinity — once again, a conventional reading of lesbianism springs to mind: lesbians are masculine women. Fontaine's position as the passive partner in these homosexual pairings invokes another connotation associated with lesbianism: she plays the "Femme" to the master's, the prefect's and Rebecca's "Butch."

While the novel is more explicit in its associations of Rebecca and Fontaine's character with queerness, the film's very repression of the subject actually reinforces its presence as a relentless undercurrent. On screen, the most stringent ambiguities surrounding Rebecca's femininity are indicated by Maxim's requests that Fontaine not change, that she not become more like Rebecca. Frank's comment that she was a "beautiful creature" similarly problematizes the idealization of her feminine stature. Fontaine's refusal to heed these ambiguous warnings indicates that her fascination with Rebecca somehow exceeds Maxim's desires for Rebecca. Fontaine's insistence on assuming Rebecca's place in Manderley and the repeated doubling of her with the first Mrs. de Winter, intimate Fontaine's intention to adopt Rebecca's position in the text — the position of the sexual renegade: the monstrous queer.

Rebecca's intrusion into her successor's life thus contributes to the fragmentation of Fontaine's desires. For the sake of clarity, those desires can roughly be divided into the following categories: (1) her desire for a romantic coupling with Maxim; (2) her desire for a familial union with (a) Max as a father figure and (b) Rebecca as an idealized mother; and (3) her romantic desire for Rebecca, for an absent female body. Fontaine's heterosexual desire has received the most critical attention in readings of the film. For example, Mary Ann Doane notes that in *Rebecca* "the diegetic film's continuous unfolding guaranteed a rather fragile binding of the drives in the heterosexual unit of the harmonious couple."¹² Although Doane goes on to address the manner in which that union is rendered tenuous in the film, the hetero-

sexual couple serves as the central pivot of her analysis.

Fontaine's familial desires have also been noted by critics. Her relationship to Maxim is heavily coded as that between a daughter and her father. (For example, Max requests that she not grow up, that she stop biting her nails, and that she not catch cold.) Donald Ranvaud notes that Max becomes her "acquired father-figure," the man who rescues her from her (lower) socio-economic position and, in classic fairy-tale fashion, removes her from the jaws of the beast — in this instance, her horrid employer, Mrs. Van Hopper.¹³

That Rebecca serves as Fontaine's idealized mother has been argued quite forcefully by Tania Modleski:

Hitchcock's films [present] images of ambiguous sexuality that threaten to destabilize the gender identity of the protagonists and viewers alike. Although in *Psycho* the mother/son relationship is paramount, I will argue that in films from *Rebecca* on it is more often the mother/daughter relationship that evokes this threat to identity and constitutes the main "problem" of the films (5).

Modleski describes *Rebecca* as a female Oedipal drama in which Fontaine must vanquish the threat of her maternal rival in order to take up her proper position within an Oedipal scenario, her proper position with her husband/father. As she notes, "it becomes obvious that the two desires cannot coexist: the desire for the mother impedes the progress of the heterosexual union. Ultimately, then, the heroine disavows her desire for the mother, affirming her primary attachment to the male" (51).

Modleski's reading is a compelling, but partial one. Its strength resides in the recognition of the central function of the figure of Rebecca to the narrative, to the development of Fontaine's character, and to the film's primary heterosexual relationship. Her reading is, however, limited by her conflation of Rebecca's role as a maternal figure with her position as an object of female sexual desire. Modleski achieves this conflation by remarking on the issue of lesbianism ("there is something more at stake here, something potentially more subversive" [51]), and working that issue through in a rapid manner. Noting the limitations of the Electra complex for its too-rigid conceptualization of the girl's perception of her mother as an object of rivalry for her father's attention, Modleski argues the existence and power of the desire of women for other women" (51). She goes on to assert that Fontaine repeatedly seeks the affections of Mrs. Danvers (the bad mother), a woman obsessed with and sexually attracted to Rebecca. After establishing Fontaine's links to two mother-figures (Rebecca and Danvers), Modleski writes the passage quoted above: "[t]he desire for the mother impedes the progress of the heterosexual union..." (51). The logic of Modleski's argument obscures a critical slippage. The rhetorical move is from the concept of lesbianism, to the elaboration of Fontaine's maternal feelings for Danvers, to Danvers' sexual attraction to Rebecca — queer desire is displaced from the daughter onto the bad mother. It is not Fontaine who sexually desires Rebecca, the argument suggests, it is Mrs. Danvers who does so. Fontaine's rejection of

Rebecca need not be read as the rejection of "something subversive," but functions instead to promote the viability of the Electra complex. (If she's not attracted to Rebecca then it stands to reason that her disavowal depends upon Rebecca's status as a rival for Maxim's affections.)

Assuming, however, that Modleski is sincere in her criticism of the Electra complex as an adequate theorization of relationships among women, her argument must be revised. That revision requires the reworking of Rebecca's function within the film. Modleski's comment might thus be reworded: "[t]he desire for the mother [as a sexual object] impedes the progress of the heterosexual union." Such a revision is consonant with both psychoanalysis and feminist notions of bisexual spectatorship, which rely upon an assumption of pre-Oedipal proximity between daughter and mother, a proximity used to theorize women's overidentification with other women and, in the case of the female viewer and her gaze, with images.¹⁴ This reading is, however, limited in that it suggests that the desire of one woman for another is explicable either as a form of regression or as an idealized relationship, both of which depend upon overidentification as a premise. Modleski's concept — shared by other feminist film theorists and critics — that the desire for the mother impedes the progress of the heterosexual couple, can be rephrased as follows: Desire marked by same-sex identification with the mother impedes the progress of desire marked by sexual difference, i.e., desire for a man. For the heterosexual couple to succeed, there must be a shift away from same-sex identification, from sameness *per se*, to sexual difference. Adult female subjectivity and sexuality are, from this theoretical position, characterized by the female subject's accession to a position marked by difference and it is only lesser forms of sexuality which posit sameness as their *modus operandi*.¹⁵

Since psychoanalysis privileges sexual difference, a male-female binary opposition, to account for identification pro-

8. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990) 112.

9. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

10. Alison Light, "'Returning to Manderley' — Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class," *Feminist Review* 16 (Summer 1984): 12.

11. The sex and gender ambiguities surrounding these quotations are strong. In speaking of herself as a "scrubby schoolboy," Fontaine's character is articulating her position in relation to Maxim. In the second example, when she describes herself as a "whipping boy," her "master" is her employer, Mrs. Van Hopper. The shifting connotations of both examples — male homosexual, lesbian and heterosexual — vie for position.

12. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987) 166.

13. Donald Ranvaud, "Rebecca," *Framework* 13 (Autumn 1980): 21.

14. Modleski adopts this perspective in the introduction to her book. In her discussion of female bisexuality she draws upon and revises Mary Ann Doane's theorization of the woman-mother-image trajectory (Doane 1982). Unlike Doane, Modleski asserts that overidentification is less a problem for the women who experience it, than it is for a patriarchal culture that does not know how to accommodate it.

15. This issue is a complex one. In her recent book, *Epistemology of*



Stills (above and opposite):
the second Mrs. de Winter transformed.

cesses, queer relationships are, by definition, theorized as either less-than (regressed) or more-than (over-identified), and thus always operate *in relation* to a heterosexual norm. The heterosexism inherent in this reading of psychic processes is apparent. It is also insidious in that it depends upon the notion of identification for its explanatory power and results in a consequent elision or reduction of queer sexual desires. In the realm of film analysis, the female spectator's gaze at female characters becomes a gaze marked by same-sex identification. While this viewing process may or may not subsume sexual desires, those desires are not the organizing principle of the gaze, as is the case for the traditionally-conceived heterosexual male viewer.¹⁶ If sexual desires are equated with identification processes that are uniform for all women, how are queer female subjectivities to be differentiated from heterosexual female subjectivities? In prevailing uses of psychoanalysis to theorize the female spectator's gaze, they are not. It is all women's potential for bisexual identification which is addressed by this concept, and not queer women's potentials for same-sex sexual desire.¹⁷

In order for queer sexual desires to be removed from the domain of heterosexual identification processes, Rebecca's status as a maternal figure must be separated from her role as an object of female sexual desires.¹⁸ Such a move involves a critical amputation of psychoanalysis, but it is

the Closet, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick makes an important point regarding the historical contribution of assumptions that homo-desire, unlike conventional definitions of hetero-desire, have since the end of the last century been addressed in terms of identification. As she notes, "I do not, myself, believe same-sex relationships are much more likely to be based on similarity than are cross-sex relationships. That is, I do not believe that identification and desire are necessarily more closely linked in same-sex than in cross-sex relationships, or in gay than in nongay persons. I assume them to be closely linked in many or most relationships and persons, in fact.... Yet these *are* assumptions that underlie, and are in turn underwritten by, the definitional invention of 'homosexuality'" (159). In a footnote, she continues: "[T]he fact that 'homosexuality,' being...posited on definitional similarity, was the first modern piece of sexual definition that simply took as nugatory the distinction between relations of identification and relations of desire, meant that it posed a radical question to cross-gender relations and, in turn, to gender discourse in which a man's desire for a woman could not guarantee his difference from her — in which it might even, rather, suggest his likeness to her" (159-160). That psychoanalysis has historically grappled with precisely this issue of sameness/difference should not be overlooked. However, psychoanalysis has thus far failed to account for it other than by means of hierarchizing desire and placing heterosexuality at the top of the list.

16. To posit the viability of sexualized queer gazing is difficult within the realm of psychoanalysis, since queer gazes are not constructed on the basis of sexual difference and thus can only be problematically theorized via the primary concepts attributed to the heterosexual male gaze: fetishism, voyeurism and scopophilia.

17. I am indebted to Sue-Ellen Case for drawing my attention to this important distinction between theorizations of female spectatorial identification processes (as developed in some feminist film theory) and lesbian sexual desires. I was first introduced to this distinction in Case's "Tracking the Vampire," mentioned earlier.

18. I do not take issue with Modleski's argument that Rebecca serves a maternal function, a function which operates as a major

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one suggested by Modleski's reading itself. That is, since Danvers is constructed as a bad mother who is sexually attracted to another woman (Rebecca), Fontaine's interest in Rebecca might also be considered an adult woman's attraction to another. *Rebecca* may, therefore, be a drama which depends upon the illusion of Oedipus and/or Electra to maintain the status quo, but which ripples with a Sapphic menace that continuously threatens to erupt through the narrative's surface.

Despite the enduring power of the queer undercurrents which charge *Rebecca*'s textural universe, as the film's heroine Fontaine must eventually adhere to the conventions of most Hollywood cinema and assume a culturally desirable — adult heterosexual — position. Modleski provides an interesting reading of the function of Fontaine's fascination with Rebecca as it relates to the position she must eventually adopt. In order for her to detach from the mother and attach to Maxim, Modleski argues that "she must try to make her desire mirror the man's desire" (50). That this is no easy task is suggested both by the fact that Maxim never expresses his desire for Rebecca and by the fact that, in the end, it is revealed that he only briefly desired her. Since Fontaine assumes, despite indications to the contrary, that Max desires his first wife, she replicates that desire. As Modleski asserts, "the project of the film is to get Maxim to turn his gaze away from Rebecca and toward the heroine" (48). In order to accomplish this project, Fontaine reproduces (her fantasy of) his interest in the first Mrs. de Winter. This interpretation traverses the edge of queerness (Fontaine romantically desires Rebecca), but does not call that edge by its proper name. While the project of *Rebecca* may be, in part, to realign Max's attention from his first to his second wife, that realignment depends upon the second wife's fascination with the first. The project of the film is both to shift Maxim's gaze from the object of his hatred (for it happens that his preoccupation with Rebecca is not characterized by a longing for his dead wife, but by a loathing of her), and to shift the heroine's gaze from the object of her desire. Two shifts are required for the narrative to be resolved heterosexually, but it is only Fontaine's gaze which demands a realignment of romantic desire.

Fontaine's fascination with Rebecca is often mediated by the film's most obvious queer character, the wicked witch of the West wing, Mrs. Danvers. Danvers traverses the novel and film with a male appellation, "Danny," and thus shares the masculine attributes associated with Rebecca and her successor in the book. Danvers' marginal sexual orientation has been duly noted by critics. "Though no one mentioned the underlying lesbianism of the Rebecca-Danvers relationship, Hitchcock sensed it,"¹⁹ asserts Leonard Heff in *Hitchcock and Selznick*. And referring to the censorship concerns which that relationship fostered in the Production Code Administration offices, he continues: "In the final cut, Breen told Selznick, 'there must be no suggestion whatever of a perverted relationship between Mrs. Danvers and Rebecca. If any possible hint of this creeps [in],...we will of course not be able to approve the picture.'"²⁰ Breen's reaction is important on two counts. First, it indicates that the film's "perversion" is not confined to Danvers and her

bizarre behaviour; it refers more generally to Danvers and Rebecca's relationship with each other. Second, Breen's response suggests that his office somehow overlooked the endurance of Danvers' romantic attachment to her mistress in the final cut, since it is represented in various forms. For example, in an early scene Mrs. Van Hopper, speaking of Max's feelings for his first wife, notes: "He simply adored Rebecca." Later in the film, when Beatrice (Gladys Cooper), Maxim's sister, explains Danvers' rudeness to Fontaine, she asserts: "She [Mrs. Danvers] simply adored Rebecca." Through verbal parallels, Danny's feelings are equated with those of a husband/lover. Although she is attracted to Rebecca, Danvers is also represented as similar to the object of her desire.²¹ Dressed entirely in black, Danny haunts Manderley's hallways. Her rigid stance and odd facial expressions mark her as an unnatural figure.

In addition to her extreme attachment and likeness to Rebecca, Danvers serves as another type of threat: the queer who lures unsuspecting victims into her state of perversion, the homo that recruits. Danvers' abnormality and threatening qualities coalesce in the domain which most explicitly links monstrosity with femininity and sexuality — Rebecca's bedroom. While Danvers focuses on Fontaine's difference from the first Mrs. de Winter through most of the film, in Rebecca's suite she insists on Fontaine's likeness to her predecessor. As Modleski phrases it, in the bedroom scene Danvers asks Fontaine to "substitute her body for the body of Rebecca" (48). Fontaine's willingness to accommodate this substitution is a testament both to Danvers' hypnotic and manipulative powers, and to Fontaine's interest in being as close as possible to Rebecca.

The second Mrs. de Winter's initial visit to Rebecca's suite serves as a potent site for the consideration of Fontaine's attraction to the first Mrs. de Winter. In this sequence, the heroine's movements and her position within the frame reinforce the doubling of Fontaine with Rebecca, the substitution of one body for the other, in that the former takes up the latter's place in the room (both in terms of her physical position, as well as in terms of Danny's seduction

threat to destabilize gender identity in the film. I do, however, believe that there is, as Modleski implies, more at stake in the text — namely, queer desires' threat to destabilize heterosexual sexual (and not just identification) systems.

19. Hitchcock, of course, seemed to have a special talent for sensing and developing homosexual themes, as indicated by his other films *Rope* and *Strangers on a Train*.

20. Leonard Heff, *Hitchcock and Selznick* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987) 70.

21. Danny's similarity to Rebecca and her alignment with lesbianism are further established at the film's end when she burns to death in the mansion. Her demise recalls B. Ruby Rich's assessment of lesbianism in mainstream cinema: "the tradition of [representing] lesbianism as tragic, powerless, passive, and in particular fatal to its adherent" (Rich 47). Rebecca's death, prior to the film's opening, also supports this estimation of the fate of queers in classical Hollywood cinema. Rich's remarks find support in Lilyan Brock's 1935 novel, *Queer Patterns*. The heroine, Sheila Case, is brutally murdered by an insane ex-boyfriend and a minor lesbian character, Jo Trent — hopelessly in love with an unreciprocating Sheila — throws herself in front of a truck to end her misery.



Hitchcock's personal appearance (cut from the film), regarding Jack Favell (George Sanders) with interest and suspicion.



The heroine who never acquires a name, with Mrs. van Hopper (Florence Bates).

of her). Moreover, her movements and facial expressions are quite forcefully arranged in relation to her desires for Max and Rebecca. Fontaine's performance is thus mediated by her simultaneous attraction to her husband and his former wife, by the alternation between the homosexual and heterosexual attractions that characterize her queer desires.

When Fontaine enters Rebecca's rooms, her shadow is reflected on a wall at the left of the frame, immediately aligning her with the suite's previous, ghostly occupant. She opens a window and there is a cut to a medium shot of her at Rebecca's vanity touching a brush. As she fondles Rebecca's possessions, Fontaine is startled by a photograph of Max which rests on the table. She turns away from his image and the camera pans with her as she walks to the right of the frame, towards the bed. The shutters clatter and Danvers, in silhouette, fills the frame. Fontaine's attraction to Rebecca is already suggested in this brief segment. Supported by camera movement, Fontaine touches Rebecca's personal property, she literally gasps at the sight of Maxim's photograph, she physically turns away from him, and walks towards the space which signifies Rebecca's sexuality — her bedroom.

As the scene continues, Fontaine is pulled further and further away from the lure of Max's image and closer to Danvers' enamoured reminiscences of Rebecca. In a two-shot, Danvers removes Rebecca's fur coat from a closet. She rubs her own face with the sleeve; she then reaches out to Fontaine and does the same to her cheek. The sexual overtones of this gesture are clear. Not only does Danvers caress herself with a garment worn by Rebecca, but she touches Fontaine in precisely the same way, instigating a circulation of Rebecca's "touch." From a queer perspective, Danvers' actions, removing the coat from Rebecca's wardrobe, can be read as a humorous form of outing. In her book on the homosexual closet and homo/hetero gender relations, Sedgwick coins a phrase in reference to a sequence from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* which is also an apt description of Danvers' gesture: It is "the theatricalization of a closet-figured-as-spectacle" (242). Viewed from this angle, Danvers pulls her paramour out of the proverbial closet by removing and caressing a coat worn by Rebecca. Fontaine is implicated in this process in that she too cops a feel.

The queer connotations of this scene continue in the next two-shot, when Danvers pulls out a drawer filled with Rebecca's undergarments (made especially for her by the nuns of St. Claire²²). As Danvers bends over and fondles them, Fontaine stands rigidly, trying to retain her composure but unable to keep her eyes off the clothing. Fontaine's attention is again drawn to Rebecca's clothes, in this instance her delicate underwear. Danny then closes the drawer and leans with her back against the wall. Fontaine stands in an identical position on the opposite side of the frame and listens intently as Danvers recounts: "I always used to wait up for her no matter how late." As she utters these words, both women, separated by the space which fills the centre of the frame, have their faces slightly lifted. Danny completes her sentence and she and Fontaine simultaneously turn their heads to the background where Rebecca's vanity can be seen. Danvers describes how she

used to keep Rebecca company while she undressed, bathed, and prepared for bed.

The positioning and performances of the women are extremely stylized in this sequence. While standing on opposite sides of the frame with their heads lifted, they listen to the space between them as if it were palpable, as if it were occupied by a figure communicating with them. When they shift their gazes to the background, they look at the place once filled with Rebecca's body. Their movement is thus orchestrated in relation to Rebecca — they attend to an absent presence. As the scene continues, Fontaine sits at the vanity and Danny mimics brushing her — Rebecca's — hair. The camera then pans to the photo of Max. Although Maxim's image might be said to draw the women away from Rebecca, in that the camera moves towards it, Danny's attention is not displaced and Fontaine's is only briefly realigned. The women barely acknowledge him. As the scene continues, Danvers shows Fontaine Rebecca's pillowcase, which Danny embroidered herself, and she pulls out a black see-through negligée which she touches gently. Danvers urges the heroine to move closer to look at the lingerie. As Fontaine moves, so does the camera which pans around the outside of the bed. Fontaine stares at the black negligée. As she does so, she is entrapped both within the frame and within the confines of the bed's posts; she is locked into the space that most explicitly signifies Rebecca's sexual activities.²³ This shot is broken by Fontaine's attempt to get away from Danvers and the negligée. Fontaine walks rapidly towards the door, followed by Danny. There is a zoom into the two women's faces as the heroine is frightened by Mrs. Danvers' eerie words: "Sometimes I wonder if she doesn't come back here to Manderley and watch you and Mr. de Winter." Fontaine runs out of the room and out of Rebecca's domain.

This scene is marked by a series of movements between Fontaine and Maxim's photo, between Danvers and Rebecca, Danvers and Fontaine, and Fontaine and Rebecca. Attraction and repulsion circulate simultaneously in each of these pairings. It is worth noting that both in relation to Rebecca and to Max, Fontaine's romantic desires are coupled with fear. Leff argues that the scene's mood is intentional: "Hitchcock's staging, alternately widening and narrowing the spaces between the characters in the large, airy room, mirrored the attraction-repulsion theme that tortures the young heroine not only in the sequence but throughout the film" (71). Thus, neither heterosexual nor queer romance finds smooth representation in this sequence. While in the remainder of the film Max often functions as a visual and narrative force to be reckoned with, here he is as trapped by the frame of a photograph as Fontaine is by the four posts of Rebecca's bed. Fontaine does finally escape the room, but her powerful fascination with her predecessor indicates that the scene is a central pivot of the text. Thus, although marked by Maxim's presence, this scene is overwhelmingly about relationships among women.

The representation of female bonding in film is, according to Chris Straayer, potent. As she notes:

Females together on the screen signal simultaneously a

lack of sexuality and a forbidden sexuality, both of which upset the film's heterosexual mechanisms. Within those mechanisms, female bonding poses a narrative blandness. Since both filmic narrative desires are fueled by sexual desire, films often introduce sexual signals to eroticize such framing which contains two women. Once eroticized, however, female bonding threatens to subvert or, worse, circumvent that heterosexual scheme entirely. The primary threat of female bonding is the elimination of the male.²⁴

The scene in Rebecca's bedroom puts into play the threats posed by Straayer's comments: the sexualization of female couplings, the subversion of heterosexuality, and the elimination of the male. A second bedroom scene, in which Danny nearly coaxes Fontaine to jump out a window to the terrace below, similarly relies on a threat to heterosexual romance and to the narrative primacy of the male. Although Fontaine does not jump to the pavement, does not join Rebecca's body in the water adjacent to the mansion, the scene revolves around the very real possibility that she will do so, that she will abandon her husband and jump. In a sense, it is Rebecca who prevents Fontaine from suicide. Precisely at the moment that she is about to fulfil Danvers' wishes, Rebecca's boat and body are discovered. There is no need for her to dive from the window, Rebecca is no longer in the water below. Rebecca, the film's absent body, has come to her.

In her article on the hypothetical lesbian heroine, Straayer notes that "when one searches for lesbian exchange in narrative film constructions, one finds a constant flux between competing forces to suggest and deny it" (54). *Rebecca* is a film which forcefully illustrates Straayer's argument. Punctuated by clues that repeatedly point to Rebecca's, Danvers', and Fontaine's queer desires, the novel and film weave non-heterosexual lures into their narrative fabrics. *Rebecca's* Sapphic menace is constructed on the coat-tails of homophobic stereotyping: Rebecca is monstrous, diseased, non-reproductive, destructive, unnatural, masculine, and a man-hater. She is also strikingly beautiful, powerful, and alluring enough to sustain the attentions of her housekeeper and her successor, and to jeopardize the success of the film's primary heterosexual union. That the queer's most influential and engaging attributes belong to a character who is physically absent from the film underscores both the potency of her threat and the limitations of patriarchal structures of representation — structures in which queerness is relegated to discourses of invisibility and silence.

Despite Rebecca's physical absence from the film, she occupies a palpable position in the narrative, her presence is felt by others. Moreover, her spirit survives not only in the form of a ghost that haunts the mansion, but also in the form of a woman who dreams of returning to Manderley. Fontaine's fascination with Rebecca and her repeated doubling with her, suggest that the first Mrs. de Winter survives the story (and her own death) in the figure of her successor. As Patricia White notes of Fontaine's sexuality in the film, it is "latent, not necessarily, not yet, lesbian" (153). There is every reason to believe that Fontaine's burgeoning sexuality

does or will one day indicate her adoption of Rebecca's status as a sexual renegade, a woman simultaneously inside and outside the boundaries of dominant social convention.

Rebecca's disruptive sexuality traverses the film at once dependent upon heterosexual romance (she did marry Maxim) and in opposition to it (she does attract Fontaine and Danvers). While social convention and economic imperatives may have led Rebecca (and Fontaine's character) to marry Maxim de Winter, to be the "sort of person men marry," Rebecca's matrimonial status was tenuous at best, and Fontaine's fares no better. Given different social conditions and options, Rebecca and Fontaine may not be the sort of people who marry men. That Rebecca's textual position is as attractive to readers and viewers as it is to Fontaine is suggested by Harriet Hawkins in her analysis of the novel: "The female reader will readily identify with the insecure narrator's sense of inadequacy in contrast to the unattainable perfection of the woman who had everything.... Yet — *mutatis mutandis* — the character most female readers would most like to be like is, of course, the confident, the fearless, the popular, the accomplished, the adored, [and I might add, the queer,] Rebecca" (146).

The ambiguous monstrosity of *Rebecca's* queer sub-text is consonant with the social constraints of the historical and cultural milieu in which the novel and movie appeared. "Here is a much-needed book which examines straight-forwardly the dramatic problems of women involved too intimately in one another's lives — a powerful novel of a little known social menace," notes the back-cover synopsis of *Queer Patterns*; a mass-produced, 1935 paperback by Lilyan Brock that traces the lesbian sexual awakenings of the stage actress, Sheila Case.²⁵ "Read this book, and gain an enlightened understanding of the lost women whose strange urges produce one of the great problems of modern society." Despite the ominous tone of this back-cover quotation, the novel simultaneously supports and critiques the characterization of queerness as a menace — it is both threatening and destructive, and misunderstood and romantically appealing. Hitchcock's film-version of Du Maurier's 1938 novel

22. It is noteworthy that other than in relation to her cousin Jack Favell (who, as noted earlier, is represented as a feminized man), Rebecca is repeatedly associated with other women, e.g., Danvers, Lady Caroline de Winter, Fontaine, the nuns of St. Claire and the drowned woman whom Max identified as his wife.

23. This scene is filled with a fascination with Rebecca's possessions — hair brushes, coat, underwear, negligée — that borders on fetishism. However, unlike the traditional conceptualization of fetishism as the male subject's substitution of various objects as a means of disavowing female castration, Rebecca's belongings serve to render that which is lacking, specifically their owner, powerfully present-in-absentia. The fetishization of Rebecca's personal property does not quash Danvers' and Fontaine's castration anxieties — why indeed would they have castration anxieties? — but serves, instead, to fuel Danvers' enamoured reminiscences of the woman she adores and to reinforce Fontaine's feelings of fear and desire for Max's alluring and powerful first wife.

24. Chris Straayer, "The Hypothetical Lesbian Heroine: *Voyage en douce* (Michele Deville, 1980), *Entre Nous* (Diane Kurys, 1983)," *Jump Cut* 35 (1990): 54.

25. Lilyan Brock, *Queer Patterns* (New York: Eton Books, 1935).

Rebecca bears a striking resemblance to this description of Brock's book. Whereas *Queer Patterns* is a "straight-forward" examination of lesbianism, *Rebecca's* queerness is represented on a subterranean level — it dwells in a textual underground, as Sue-Ellen Case might phrase it. But *Rebecca*, like *Queer Patterns*, might also be described as a story in which women are "too" intimately involved with each other, as Modleski's argument suggests. Like *Queer Patterns*, *Rebecca* represents the intimate involvement of 1930s' women in an ambiguous manner: it is both threatening and appealing, monstrous and attractive.

The ambiguous representation of women's relationships was a common feature of American society in the early part of this century (and it remains so today as the recent film *Thelma and Louise* [1991] intimates). Historical accounts of the 1930s indicate that it was a period in which the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century gains of the educated and prominent New Women were negatively transformed. Between the 1890s and 1910s, New Women often lived in all-female communities, dedicated themselves to procuring women's rights, and amassed significant political powers. By the 1920s and 1930s, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg asserts, "women and men alike had disowned the New Women's brave vision" of a more equitable distribution of gender relations.²⁶ The darker side of American culture's treatment of female independence emerged in the '20s and '30s as "charges of lesbianism had become a common way to discredit women professionals, reformers, and educators" (281). Possibly in an attempt to avoid such charges, the marriage rate increased, the age at which women married decreased, and the percentage of women to attain college, graduate, and professional degrees dropped significantly. New Women, women who stood for female independence, education, and equality were, by the 1930s, the foci of ambiguous social representations — earlier commended, they were now criticized; earlier perceived as mildly threatening, they were now deemed a social and sexual menace. It is these perceptions of women and their social position that informed the popular imagination of the United States in the 1930s. It is alongside this ambiguous heritage of representing independent women that *Rebecca* emerged.

In light of the historical context, it is not surprising that the act of tracing *Rebecca's* "queer patterns" is an act of excavation, an attempt to render Rebecca corporeal in a text that continuously undermines her figural presence.²⁷ It is also not surprising that Rebecca's status within the film's universe, a status reminiscent of the New Woman's move towards marriage and away from independence, is represented as monstrous, sexually threatening and disruptive of conventional heterosexuality. Despite her horrifying attributes, however, she is a figure that commands attention — which is no easy feat, considering her invisibility. Rebecca is a character that is never allowed to show herself, to speak for herself. Queerness is, like the first Mrs. de Winter, allowed to circulate through *Rebecca*, but it is not permitted to declare itself. In speaking it, in asserting that a Sapphic menace permeates the text, I hope that I have brought Rebecca de Winter one step closer to identifying her own identity, to materializing amid Manderley's ruins.

Maxim didn't quite know what he was saying when he described Rebecca's appearance the night she died, but his words come closer than any others in the film to naming the unspeakable: "She looked ill, queer." Queer, indeed.

26. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf, 1985) 254, 246.

27. Despite the fact that Rebecca is denied a corporeal existence in the film, she is given a form and body in publicity discourses that surrounded the text. In an advertisement for *Rebecca*, an image of Fontaine's and Olivier's faces dominates the right, upper-hand corner of the poster. Their faces are suspended over an image of a book with "Rebecca" printed on its cover. They gaze past the book to the left of the poster. In the lower, left-hand corner stands a white figure. She is a curvaceous woman whose dress is as white as her flesh and whose features are perceptible but indistinct. The lower half of her body melts into an image of Manderley. Although ghost-like, Rebecca is given a physical presence in this poster — she stands guard over Manderley and draws her co-stars' gazes to her side of the advertisement.

I would like to thank Gaia Banks, Alexander Doty, Anne Friedberg, Alison McKee, and Linda Williams for their helpful insights and editorial suggestions on an earlier version of this article.

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This brief article constitutes at once a confession and an act of contrition: a very belated attempt to atone for one of the most egregious of my (doubtless many) professional sins.

When I wrote *Hitchcock's Films*, approximately twenty-five years ago, I wrote, in the course of what a later footnote somewhat charitably describes as 'a callow and inept account of an extremely rich and difficult film':

'...In any case, the film fails either to assimilate or to vomit out the indigestible novelettish ingredients of Daphne du Maurier's book...'

The confession: I had not at that time read *Rebecca*, and was guided purely by prejudice, hearsay, and the reprehensible intellectual snobbery of a young man who had recently come down from Cambridge (and from F. R. Leavis) with a degree in English literature. The fact that (as far as I am aware) no one has ever challenged me on this not merely ignorant and dishonest but completely untenable judgement suggests that the prejudice may be quite widely shared among intellectuals and academics, which makes it the more necessary to attempt rectification.

Rebecca Reclaimed

FOR DAPHNE DU MAURIER

by Robin Wood

The footnote referred to above was added for *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (1990), and is largely devoted to presenting the film as 'a complex text in which the director's presence is one determining factor among many possible ones.' Yet the only other collaborative creative force identified is that of Selznick; not only is the crucial importance of du Maurier's contribution still not acknowledged, it continues to be assumed an *obstacle* to what Hitchcock was doing:

'The logic of the film would have Rebecca its heroine, a project made impossible by Selznick's well-documented commitment to a faithful rendering of du Maurier's novel, but magnificently realized a few years later by him and Hitchcock as *The Paradine Case*.'

I read *Rebecca* at last after reading Rhona Berenstein's fascinating re-interpretation of the film (to which this little piece might be taken as an unsolicited appendix). Unlike the only other du Maurier novel I have so far read, *Frenchman's Creek* (but there is much more to say about that, too...), *Rebecca*



Alfred Hitchcock and Joan Fontaine on the set of *Rebecca*

contains no 'indigestible novelettish ingredients' whatever, and if the admirable film of Hitchcock/Selznick fails to assimilate anything from it, it is the novel's more subversive elements. In fact, *Rebecca* suggests to me, from first to last, the work of an author at once in complete possession of, and completely possessed by, her subject. The suggestion that Rebecca is the real heroine (which first came to me, along with so much else, from Andrew Britton) can be even more substantially argued from the novel than from the movie.

Perhaps the crucial difference (a complicated matter of quality, complexity, realization) between *Rebecca* and *Frenchman's Creek* has its source in the former's first person narration. The author is traditionally omniscient and infallible; a character within the novel, even when granted the status of narrator, is not. We have to take (or, more probably, leave) on trust du Maurier's estimate of her totally implausible and unrealized wish-fulfilment pirate hero; on the other hand, we nowhere have *her* view of Maxim du Winter, only that of the significantly nameless heroine who, unlike

Rebecca, never achieves an autonomous identity, remaining to the end 'Mrs. de Winter.' I would argue that this not only gives the reader greater freedom of interpretation: more fundamentally, it allowed du Maurier far greater freedom of imagination, invention and response. She no longer had to feel personally responsible for the implications of the narrative, as it no longer belonged to her.

This is not the place for an exhaustive analysis of the novel (which I believe it would repay). I shall limit myself to four points at which the film (always, I think, to its detriment) diverges from it — adding that in most cases the divergences seem motivated by concern to stay within Hays Office strictures rather than by any personal desire of the film-makers.

1. To dispose first of the most obvious — the one everyone knows about: Maxim's murder of Rebecca. The Hays Code is unequivocal here: *no one* in a Hollywood film might be shown to get away with murder unpunished and undetected. Selznick and Hitchcock were thus faced with two

options: either the film must end with Maxim facing (at least) life imprisonment, or Rebecca's death must be accidental. This has always seemed to me one of the rare instances where it is legitimate for the viewer mentally to rewrite the film: one can confidently assume that this is what the film-makers would have wished. (Another instance, to be treated in detail by Richard Lippe in a future issue, is the absolute necessity of 'editing out' the disastrous two-minute scene of Melvyn Douglas's telephone call to the ski lodge in *Two-Faced Woman*, cut in solely to appease the Legion of Decency, which virtually destroys a brilliant film.)

There is nothing accidental about Rebecca's death in the novel ('When I killed her she was smiling still. I fired at her heart'), though the event is somewhat complex, with implications of suicide as well as murder: Rebecca goads Maxim into killing her because she knows she has inoperable cancer and rejects the indignity of a protracted and painful death. The method she chooses has particular significance in relation to Maxim and the patriarchal male ego: She pretends to be pregnant with someone else's child, and the last straw (for Maxim) is her taunting him with the 'fact' that her child will inherit Manderley as his heir. (This relates closely, in the book's intricate thematic structure, to my fourth point, below.)

2. A relatively minor matter, but not without importance: in the footnote referred to above I suggest that the one stumbling-block to reading Rebecca as the film's 'real heroine' is her treatment of Ben, specifically, her threat to get him sent to an asylum. The novel provides this with a precise context: Ben is an obsessive voyeur and Rebecca has caught him peering through the windows of the beach cottage at her 'illicit' lovemaking — a discovery that makes her outburst, if not excusable, at least perfectly understandable and far from a matter of mere spite. (The film, unlike the novel, cannot be explicit as to why Rebecca spent so much time in the isolated cottage, though we can of course 'read it in' without too great a strain on the imagination.)

3. A crucial — and quite extraordinary — passage in the novel has no clear equivalent in the film, perhaps because it contains little 'action' that could be translated into cinematic terms. At the beginning of Chapter Thirteen, Maxim has to go to London 'to some public dinner. A man's dinner.' There is not the slightest reason to suppose that any harm will befall him. This is what follows:

...When I saw the car disappear round the sweep in the drive I felt exactly as though it were to be a final parting and I should never see him again. There would be an accident of course and later on in the afternoon, when I came back from my walk, I should find Frith white and frightened waiting for me with a message. The doctor would have rung up from some cottage hospital. "You must be very brave," he would say, "I'm afraid you must be prepared for a great shock."

And Frank would come, and we would go to the hospital together. Maxim would not recognize me. I went through the whole thing as I was sitting at lunch, I could

see the crowd of local people clustering round the churchyard at the funeral, and myself leaning on Frank's arm. It was so real to me that I could scarcely eat my lunch, and I kept straining my ears to hear the telephone should it ring.

The passage can only be read as wish-fulfillment, imagined in great detail and with a strong commitment ('There would be an accident of course...'). Quite understandably, this fills the second Mrs. de Winter with equally intense, compensatory guilt-feelings. The resentment expressed in 'A man's dinner,' the remarkable detail in which the fantasy is indulged, the fact that the narrator, in the next paragraph, feels 'physically sick' when a phone-call comes... it is one of many passages that make it hard to believe that du Maurier was unaware of what she was doing.

The phone-call reassures the narrator that Maxim is safely ensconced in his London club. The relief was tremendous: Mrs. de Winter, mistress of Manderley, even goes so far as to steal some biscuits and eat them in the woods. Then:

Now that Maxim was safe in London, and I had eaten my biscuits, I felt very well and curiously happy. I was aware of a sense of freedom, as though I had no responsibilities at all. It was rather like a Saturday when one was a child. No lessons, and no prep. One could do as one liked. One put on an old skirt and a pair of sandshoes and played Hares and Hounds on the common with the children who lived next door.

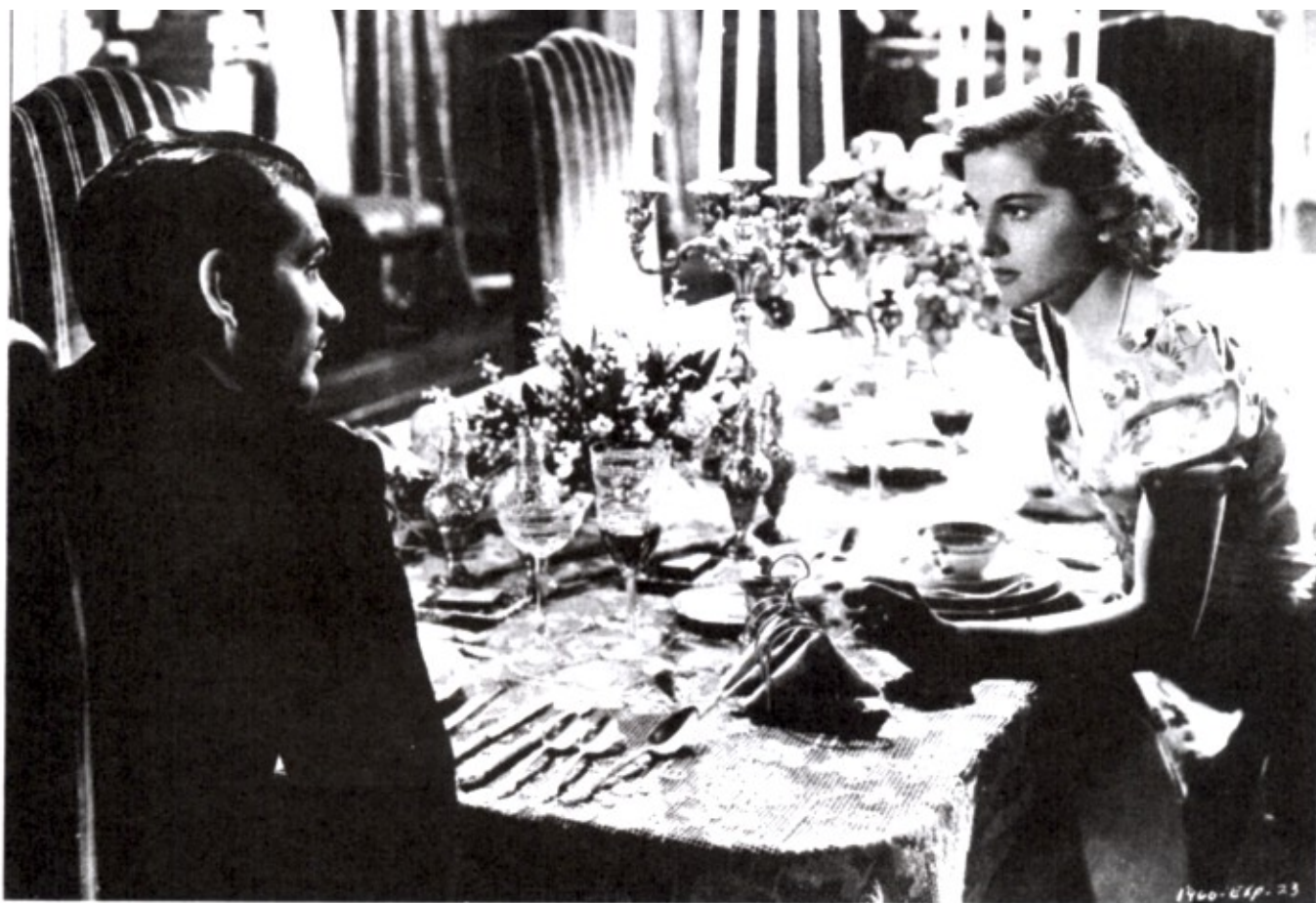
I had just the same feeling. I had not felt like this all the time I had been at Manderley. It must be because Maxim had gone to London.

I was rather shocked at myself. I could not understand it at all. I had not wanted him to go. And now this lightness of heart, this spring in my step, this childish feeling that I wanted to run across the lawn, and roll down the bank. I wiped the biscuit crumbs from my mouth and called to Jasper. Perhaps I was just feeling like this because it was a lovely day...

What she describes here, and expresses in terms of childhood memory, is of course precisely the impulse that made Rebecca reject male domination and determination, though her games of 'Hares and Hounds' were more adult.

The narrator then goes for a walk with the dog Jasper, who leads her directly to the beach cottage. Jasper is constantly associated with Rebecca; beyond that dogs (and cats) in narrative fiction are frequently used to express the repressed desires of the characters (cf. *Bringing Up Baby*). The episode as a whole, then, expresses: (a) the heroine's desire that Maxim be dead; (b) her pleasure in experiencing the freedom and autonomy she hasn't known since childhood; and (c) her desire to identify herself with Rebecca.

Rebecca is commonly perceived as a romantic love story, yet 'love' — in any positive sense of that term, aside from the drive to domination and possession that commonly passes for it in our culture — seems almost totally absent from its central relationship. The novel is (if this is possible) even firmer than the film in insisting that Maxim's attach-



ment to his second wife is entirely dependent upon her willingness to remain a helpless child under his patriarchal protection and control; as soon as she aspires to womanhood — and specifically to the personal autonomy of the 'impossible' first wife — his 'love' will evaporate. As for his wife, the passage quoted plainly implies that she would prefer him dead so long as she didn't have to bear any burden of guilt for his demise.

4. Readers coming, like myself, to the novel from the film receive a shock very early on, when, in the 'present' time prior to the flashback, the second Mrs. de Winter wonders where Mrs. Danvers and Jack Favell are now. Mrs. Danvers neither goes insane nor dies, and remains unpunished for her transgressions; the burning of Manderley is her just, poetic and rational revenge on behalf of the woman she loved, and whom she knows Maxim murdered. The framework of the novel has as one of its functions the establishment of the revenge's poetic appropriateness. The scandalous rumours surrounding Rebecca's death make it impossible for Maxim (despite his judicial exoneration) either to remain in England or to sojourn in the kind of luxury hotel in which we first encounter him in the flashback, and where he would be sure sooner or later to run into old acquaintances. He and his wife now survive, in a condition of mutual non-communication and psychological desolation, in small hotels on the continent, in permanent exile. But the crucial blow is clearly the loss of Manderley, on the ownership of which (passed down through the patriarchal line) Maxim's very identity was

founded: without it, he is a mere shell, the marriage empty and meaningless.

Did du Maurier really 'mean' all this? I'm quite certain that, on some level, she did: we don't only mean what we mean consciously. She was as fascinated by Rebecca and all she stands for as her readers have been for over half a century, and an awareness that Rebecca is indeed the real heroine seems often perilously close to the novel's surface. One can only grasp the book fully by appealing to the common psychological phenomenon of 'ambivalence.' To my knowledge, the concept first entered effective critical currency in the essay on *Richard III* in A. P. Rossiter's *Angel With Horns*, still one of the finest books on Shakespeare ever published. The concept acknowledges, simply, the ability of the human psyche to hold, on slightly different levels of consciousness, two contradictory attitudes simultaneously; the more explicit, hence *apparently* dominant, will correspond to the official morality of the culture, the other (arguably more potent) will thoroughly endanger and subvert it. It is from this standpoint that one must read *Rebecca*, both the novel and the film. It is by no means the purpose of this article to belittle the latter: it remains a work of extraordinary concentration and intensity, and one can instance felicities of performance and *mise-en-scène* that amply compensate for the suppressions demanded by the Motion Picture Code. I simply wish to do justice at last to the splendid source material. Du Maurier's *Rebecca* richly deserves the status of a minor classic which popular taste has long since accorded it.

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Constructing Culture

MEDIA EDUCATION IN THE 1990'S

by Susan Morrison

I COMING OUT

As a full-time high school teacher who has been involved in post-graduate studies at York University over the past seven years, I have been frequently confronted with the very low opinion held of teachers. To admit to one's membership in the teaching profession is akin to admitting to low-level intelligence as well as performance. I responded to the situation by assuming a kind of split: by day, I was a teacher; by night, I was a graduate student. Fortunately, I discovered that wearing all-black clothing enabled me to pass easily from one 'scene' into the other. For those readers unfamiliar with York's Social and Political Thought program, its female practitioners may be identified by their adherence to Queen Street West dress codes. I must admit that being an art teacher helped.

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Nevertheless, I continued to experience some conceptual difficulties between my daytime and nighttime practices. Aside from the obvious translation problems i.e. having to work in two separate languages, the one of contemporary critical theory and the other of contemporary non-critical adolescents, there remained the friction between academic theory and practice. That is, what I was learning at night (feminist theory, psychoanalysis, Marxist ideological critique, etc.) was being learned in a theoretically abstract way, i.e. 'on paper' or 'in talk', but not 'in practice'. Any application of these concepts to real life (in contrast to the super-rarified academic one) was left up to the individual (or not). I don't mean to be overly critical of the academic community, but there does seem to be a greater schism at that level between what one says or theorizes, and what one actually does.

I found that I could apply the ideas I was studying to the everyday practice of teaching. The route I took was to gradually shift the focus of the prescribed Visual Arts curriculum until it rested on a critical basis. Art, art teaching, and art learning were consequently problematized in order first, to question the relevance and contribution of the Visual Arts curriculum within the educational system, and second, to question the fundamental premises of that system within the larger social formation.

One of the results of this ideological/paradigmatic shift was the subsequent incorporation into my Visual Arts classes of Media studies units, especially advertising (print and video) and film. The Ontario Ministry of Education has set out prescriptive guidelines for its Visual Arts courses, emphasizing the traditional Fine Arts categories of Painting, Drawing, Sculpture and Printmaking. However, students' most frequent visual contact is with those art forms employed by the mass media; still photography, film/video, computer graphics and animation. What has been missing from those Visual Arts courses which teach in these non-traditional areas is a critical approach. Primarily, they are taught as media to be mastered rather than questioned. Advertising units may have students analyse ads to see what makes them work, but invariably the object remains to have the students produce their own print ads, TV commercials, etc., thereby re-producing the very system they are supposed to be criticizing. Even in those courses, where students have been exposed to some kind of critical apparatus for dealing with the content and technique of the mass media, I have rarely seen the practical application of material, eagerly discussed at the theoretical level, in evi-

dence in the students' own work. This rigidly maintained separation between form and content, between aesthetics and message, may be attributable to the fact that arts courses are (still) premised on modernist principles of artworks as autonomous, ahistorical, context- and content-free.

II

MEDIA EDUCATION

What I find so exciting about the growth and development of Media Education is that it offers a counterpoint to the frustrating situation noted above and evidenced elsewhere in traditional non-critical approaches to advertising and the media (consumer education, commercial art etc.). Not only does Media Education contain an enormous potential for putting into practice much of the critical theoretical material that's been percolating in the academy for the last decade and a half, but by doing so, it supports what must be the most radical critique possible within the capitalist system of an education system governed by capitalist social relations. No other legislated area of study can make similar claims.

In Ontario, the main motivating force behind Media Education has been the Association for Media Literacy (AML), an organization which draws the majority of its 1200 plus membership from interested teachers across the province. Members derive as well from the rest of Canada, the United States, Britain, Belgium, Australia, and New Zealand. The AML has lobbied successfully to make Media Studies an essential part of the curriculum, with the result that the Ontario Ministry of Education has recently called for the mandatory inclusion of Media Studies units (30% of the course time) into one intermediate level and one senior level English course for all high school students. In order to facilitate the introduction of Media education into the classroom, the AML produced *Media Literacy, Intermediate and Senior Division: A Resource Guide* 1989, a comprehensive document which serves as a handbook for teachers. It provides a rationale for media education and in-depth coverage of television, film, radio, popular music and rock video, photography, and print. In addition, in a section called Cross-Media Studies, it deals with specific common themes of current interest; e.g. Sexuality, Violence, Canadian Identity. In the introduction, the aims of Media Education are set forth as follows:

Media literacy aims to assist students to deal critically with the media and their role in their lives. The media literate student should be able to make conscious critical assessments of the media, to maintain a critical distance on popular culture, and to resist manipulation.¹

III

CONSTRUCTING CULTURE: DECONSTRUCTING PRACTICE

In May, the AML held the largest International gathering of media educators and communications people thus far,

billed as the second North American Conference on Media Education. It took place about an hour's drive from Toronto, at the University of Guelph, in Guelph, Ontario. The first conference held two years ago took as its theme 'The New Literacy: Media Education in the 1990's'; this year it was 'Constructing Culture'. Over half of the four hundred participants who attended the three-day conference were high school English teachers from Ontario. However, there were also non-English teachers, teachers from other parts of Canada and the United States, teachers from Canadian, American, European and Asian Universities and Colleges, and a comparatively large International representation of people who work in the field of communications, from TV producers to magazine editors to (at least) one member of the Province of Alberta film classification board.

The result of this eclectic mix was that the ensuing non-canonical audiences had much to gain from discussion and dialogue. I have not been to any other conference which fostered and encouraged so much openness, participation, and cross-fertilization as did this one. Days were structured by series of workshops offered at all levels and to all interests. As with most conferences, some workshops were excellent, others weak, but I found that even at the weaker ones, the opportunity for audience participation and discussion enabled the group to refocus around immediate problems and concerns.

While the overall feeling about the conference was that it was a great success, there were a number of issues which threatened to unsettle the proceedings. The first took place in the evening of the first full day of workshops. In the portfolio of materials which had been distributed to all participants was a flyer inviting us to the 'world premiere' showing of *Lethal Weapon III*, with a reception to follow sponsored by Warner Brothers. Given the nature of the conference and its participants, it was not surprising that the film met with some (well-organized) resistance. In fact, the screening was boycotted by at least half of the people at the conference. The reasons for the boycott were various. There were those who felt that the featured film should have been Canadian, not American; those who felt it should have been a progressive, non-commercial, non-Hollywood film; and those who felt it should at least have been a film with more redeeming value than the excessively violent Mel Gibson/Danny Glover/Joe Pesci vehicle shown. What made the whole thing even more problematic was that no opportunity was given to actually deal critically with the politics involved in the film or in its selection and exhibition. If the organizers had intended some kind of critical discussion to take place in order to situate the film within contemporary popular culture, then they should have provided a suitable forum in which it could take place. The argument proffered that 'Since this is what our students see, we should watch it too', is not adequate tactically, nor is the other excuse I heard, to the effect that, 'Sure, it's an example of junk culture, but isn't it well done for what it is'. For a group of educators intent upon instilling critical distance in their students, this was a remarkably short-sighted approach.

Indeed, politics as a whole fared rather poorly at the

conference. As has been emphasized above, the potential is there in Media Education for a radical critique, and many of the sessions had titles which promised just such an approach (e.g. Media and Social Change, Images of Authority in Popular Culture, Ideology and War Films, Bodies in the Classroom; Struggles over Making Sense). However, there was a curious lack of real political positioning going on. In many cases, it seemed as if the political basis for doing media education i.e. *Why teach Media Studies*, was being ignored in favour of the more easily graspable (or recuperable) *'How to teach it'* or *'What to teach'*. For example, at one of the workshops I attended, a panel discussion titled *'Critical Frameworks for Media Studies: Essential Keys for Success'*, I soon realized that the term *'critical'* was being defined as *'necessary'* rather than *'effecting a critique'*, thus emptying it of any possible oppositional power. This is no doubt an unfortunate effect of doing anything at a *'mass'* level, quite typical of educational practices, where teachers can be required to teach materials for which they have no particular feeling or commitment.

This conference occurred immediately after the incidents resulting from the Rodney King verdict, both the ensuing L.A. riots and the Toronto follow-up *'riots'* as well. It was very disappointing, given the expertise of many of the conference's speakers, that there was only minor reference made to either with no major analysis. What better opportunity could there have been for analysing the complex role of the media in making the news?

I attended a session called *'Media and Social Change'*, at which an English and Media teacher described ways in which he tried to enable his students to deal with important issues through use of media techniques. He showed a student slide show set to the Beatles' *'Nowhere Man'* which used (endlessly) repeated images of store mannequins. It was obvious that *'content'* and not form was being stressed, yet in discussion afterwards, it was revealed that his upper middle class suburban students' *real* concern was the lack of parking spaces for their cars. While many of us in the audience, and especially a teacher who was from South Central L.A., could not quite muster the sympathy necessary to deal with his students' deprivation, there remains revealed here what I see as a problem. Too often students are expected to get involved with issues like the plight of the environment, or waste disposal, which however important they might be generally, can also be used as screens for concerns which are relevant to them *as students*. Why not use their local circumstances to teach them effective and responsible action, in addition to the *'flavour of the month'* issue?

One of my primary reasons for attending this conference was the promised presence of Robyn Quin and Barry McMahon, two Australian writers/educators who had given the plenary paper *'Shifting the Power, Addressing the Ideology: Approaches to Curriculum Design'* at the first conference two years earlier. I had read a copy of it while planning the media units for my courses. What they had proposed was a well-theorized political basis for media education which held the promise of the possibility for real change.

"Good media education is radical education. It does not revere the institutions it places on the agenda. It interrogates them. The international media education program which is emerging in the syllabus documents promotes the ability to think and act critically."²

The title for their keynote address this year was *'Knowledge, Power and Pleasure: Directions in Media Education'*, its subject was the evaluation of existing media courses in Australia in order to ascertain their effectiveness, and to thereby legitimize media education as a viable pedagogical practice. One of their findings was that they discerned a gender differentiation in the ability of students to link various categories of analysis together. Girls were able to perceive connections, e.g. between codes and audience position, and codes and cultural values, which were imperceptible to boys. Quin and MacMahon suggested that the reason for this might be the girls' lack of power in the schools (and society outside). Boys aren't critical, they claimed, because they are in a position of power, and hence not as sensitive to the need to analyse the media. They proposed that a way to deal with this in the classroom would be to problematize issues of masculinity.

Another finding of interest was that, on the whole, students were good *'decoders'* of the media, but not good analysers. That is, they could take apart (or deconstruct, to use mediaspeak) an ad to reveal the *'hidden messages'*, but they could not then *'use'* that knowledge to achieve a greater understanding of the role of the mass media as a *'consciousness industry'*. One of the reasons for this, I believe, is that, as with artworks, mass media images tend to be looked at as autonomous rather than embedded within a specific social context. The overwhelming exchangeability of spectacular images, endemic to our culture at all levels of society, produces a curious homogenization of affect. A particularly potent example of this may be found in Benetton's recent ad campaign which cynically exploits precise images of human suffering and pain (a dying AIDS victim with his family, Ethiopian refugees), in the name of a self-styled enlightened liberal corporate venture.

Media education should force us to synthesize the relationship between real life and the media products (and events) that surround us. This can only be effected by a synthesis of theory and practice, privileging neither the one nor the other, but both equally. Theory without practice is merely speculative; practice without theory is empty and meaningless.

1. Media Literacy Resource Guide, Intermediate and Senior division, 1989 Ministry of Education, Ontario, p. 4

2. Robyn Quin and Barrie McMahon, "Shifting the Power, Addressing the Ideology: Approaches to Curriculum Design" A Plenary paper presented at the New Literacy: Media Education in the 1990's-The(First) North American Conference on Media Education, May 12, 1990 p. 5

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The Association For Media Literacy
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Letters

Dear Editors,

I would like to draw the attention of your readers to a grotesque editorial error in the published text of my essay on *Now, Voyager* in *Cineaction* 26/27.

In the section of the essay entitled "The erasure of the phallus," I introduce (or *did* introduce in my original manuscript) Lacan's concept of *Thé Woman* — a formulation in which Lacan attempts to represent women's simultaneous inclusion within and exclusion from the patriarchal Symbolic order in graphic terms, by the striking out of the definite article. I proceeded to use this concept of *Thé Woman*, under erasure, as a means of defining, by analogy, the conventions which govern the representation of the romantic lover in the woman's film, and I suggested that the narrative role played by Paul Henreid in *Now, Voyager* (and by George Brent, Herbert Marshall and their like in other women's films) can be expressed in the formula *Thé Phallus*. I went on to explain the phrase as follows: "The Symbolic of the woman's film includes the lover as signifier of the phallus — but it includes him only as a precondition for the enactment of the woman's desires, sufferings and struggles, which the genre defines as dramatic objects independent, and *visibly in excess*, of the phallus as the lover signifies it."

The innocents who read the proofs of my article seem not to have been familiar with the esoteric Lacanian discourse which prompted me to frame my argument in this way, and they obviously supposed that when I wrote *Thé Woman* and *Thé Phallus*, I actually intended the definite article to be omitted. It is certainly absent from the pages of *Cineaction*, and as a result, I find myself appearing before the astonished reader as the author of such memorable propositions as "The formula for 'the lover' in woman's films is Phallus." Did it not occur to anyone that this looked, or sounded, odd? What on earth did the proofreaders suppose that I meant by it? What did they suppose

that Lacan meant by saying that the formula for Woman in patriarchal language is Woman? Lacan himself would no doubt have been delighted, and even gratified, by this disruption of the signifying chain, but since it does make nonsense of one of the most important theses in my article, I think your readers should be informed that the nonsense is not of my own (or, for that matter, Lacan's) making.

Sincerely,

Andrew Britton

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England.

As the 'innocent' / guilty party I must, with great embarrassment, accept full personal responsibility for this 'grotesque editorial error.' I had read Andrew's article twice in typescript, and, because of my great admiration both for the article and its author, I volunteered to do the proofreading: ironically, I believed that, undertaking it as a labour of love, I would make a particularly good job of it. When I read the article I was of course well aware of the passage's sense; perhaps *because* I already knew the article so well, when I proofread (in a considerable hurry as we were late going to press) I no longer concentrated on the sense, allowing my eye to focus solely on typos, spelling and possible syntactical errors. The typesetter's perfectly understandable erasure of the erasure (misread as a simple crossing out) passed me by completely. I offer this, which I think is an accurate account of what happened, not as an excuse but as an explanation, and doubtless an example of those good intentions with which the road to Hell is said to be paved. I think I may say that I am as distressed as Andrew by the result.

Robin Wood

Cukor directing Garbo in *Two-Faced Woman*, one of the most unjustly maligned of all Hollywood films and desperately in need of revaluation — which will be undertaken in a subsequent issue.



CONTRIBUTORS

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Tony Williams teaches at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Robin Wood has recently completed his third novel, and still hopes that somebody, somewhere, will one day be interested in publishing his



Mimi Rogers in *The Rapture*

The Sicilian
The Rapture
Mortal Thoughts
Reversal of Fortune
School Daze
Born on the 4th of July
•
While the City Sleeps
Mann of the West
The Women
Rebecca

